

# **Journalism Education in Private Higher Learning Institutions in Malaysia: Factors Affecting Undergraduates' Choice**

*Chandrasekaran V., Ng M.L*

## **Abstract**

In the current digitally-networked era, journalism schools worldwide, especially those in developing countries are gearing towards offering courses to cater to evolving market demands and needs. In this context, there is a growing concern, especially among private higher learning institutions in Malaysia on whether to continue offering journalism or provide other courses within mass communication studies. This paper looks at private universities in Malaysia to explore on factors affecting students' choice when opting for journalism studies. It aims at verifying if there is a need to conceptualize new ways of imparting journalism education in these institutions. The study employed quantitative research method on 300 respondents from five private universities that offered journalism studies. The preliminary research findings showed that 51% preferred non-journalism courses while 49% pursued journalism at degree and diploma levels. Among the strong reasons cited for students' reluctance to pursue journalism education in Malaysia were their dejection on the country's inhibitory laws on freedom of expression, fear that journalists were exposed to physical arm, and lack of language competency to meet journalistic writing skills. The study, which also looked at preferences based on gender, found that female students were keener to specialize in journalism. Opportunities to socialize and educate the public on various issues affecting the society were found to attract students into journalism studies. While there are widespread research interests in journalism worldwide, this study hopes to track down important elements undergraduates, especially from those coming from a developing country like Malaysia, look for when opting for journalism studies. It is also hoped it will help provide recommendations to formulate proper curriculum for journalism educators.

**Keywords:** Journalism, journalism education, journalism studies, mass communication, specialization, journalism curriculum.

**Corresponding Author:**

## **Introduction**

Mensing (2010) argues that the justification for journalism schools to continue graduating thousands of hopeful recruits is increasingly debated in a context where established economic model for journalism is collapsing. While the media sector has seen dramatic changes, many journalism programs fail to meet new challenges of the industry (Hume, 2007).

In many countries, journalism education remains a stepchild at the universities despite growing enrolments (Hume, 2007). This, Hume believes, is because most programs lack the money and institutional support to reform and adapt to the digital age .

In this context, this research seeks to investigate the issue from the perspective of the students enrolled into mass communication studies in five private universities in Malaysia to analyse on factors that affects undergraduates choice when opting for journalism.

The study aims to:

- 1) Identify trends in private universities in Malaysia offering degree program in Journalism, and
- 2) Identify factors that affect Malaysian undergraduates' choice when opting for journalism studies in private higher learning institutions.

## **Literature Review**

There is a growing concern, especially among private higher learning institutions in Malaysia on whether to continue offering journalism or provide other courses within mass communication program. According to Mensing (2010), debates about whether journalism meets the definition of a profession surface regularly. In the light of the current developments in the field of journalism, “the call to reinvent journalism education has often been repeated” (Mensing, 2010, p. 512). In view of the changing needs, many have identified new ways to conceptualize journalism education, including Dennis (1984), Medsger (1996), Reese (1999), Reese and Cohen (2000), Carey (2000), Adam (2001), MacDonald (2006), and Deuze (2006).

Mensing argues that “developing new models more appropriate to the needs of this age, as opposed to that of the media industries of the past, is a compelling obligation for journalism educators and scholars” (2010, p.516). Despite this, Hume says that “most entry-level professional journalists come out of university-based journalism programs, which makes universities an important factor in media capacity building” (2007, p.4). This could be more useful, especially for private higher learning institutions offering journalism program in Malaysia.

According to Karan (2001), despite criticisms about journalism course being theoretically based and lacking a professional approach, there is extensive demand for a degree, diploma or a certificate in communication and journalism. Teachers and media practitioners believe that both education and qualification are essential in the present media environment (Karan, 2001).

Karan (2001) suggests that programs at the university level need a massive overhaul to cater to changing needs and reforms. Acknowledging the changing trends in journalism, Megwa (2001) sums up that the internet will continue to have impact on news work and online journalism will constitute a significant part of journalism education. Sharing similar views, Hume (2007) states that students should learn the basics of working with a variety of different media platforms, rather than focusing exclusively on print, broadcast, or digital formats.

To analyse students' response on journalism program, Hanna and Karen (2007) conducted a research on British journalism undergraduates on what motivated them to become journalists. Their research showed a lack of change in students' preferences for subject areas and career goals. They found that this could be an effect of experiences, and confidences gained, during journalism education. With changes and new evolving trends in journalism, it seems important that views of the undergraduates need to be assessed to identify their specific interests that would enable the relevant universities tailor appropriate journalism programs, especially in a developing country like Malaysia.

What drives undergraduates to opt for journalism? This has been a continuing topic of concern for many academic research, especially those centred on journalism education. What are the areas and concerns that calls for new outlook when preparing undergraduates opting for journalism program? Mensing (2010) calls for a move away from industry-driven education to a more community-orientated

approach that takes advantage of new technology and citizen participation. As journalism programs are taught extensively worldwide, innovative ways are blended to prepare undergraduates to fit into journalism industry which has since changed its traditional platform of reporting.

A 2005 study reported that 60 percent of US journalism schools were preparing students to work across multimedia platforms (Castaneda, et al. 2005). While this may be the case, there are also concerns that these new fads about technology may underestimate the need to meet industry needs in journalism. Aumente (2007) urges that innovation be guided by careful experimentation to avoid courses being driven by new media “fads” rather than industry demand. Stewart (2007) raises concerns on journalism education citing a lack of resources and insufficient expertise among journalism educators and competing demands for teaching resources (Auman and Lillie 2008) that hampers an effective journalism education.

Despite all these arguments and concerns, educators and media practitioners are seen to be supportive of efforts towards a more converged curriculum. Huang et al (2006) in a landmark study found consensus among educators and news professionals on the need to address media convergence in university courses while continuing to emphasise traditional journalism skills and critical thinking. Changes in global finances have also seem to reshape media industry and hence journalism education. They argued that journalism education should reflect a shift away from mainstream journalism, to freelancing and entrepreneurial journalism (Quinn 2010). Balsamo (2011) notes that

the introduction of new technology platforms by corporations like Google and apple have resulted in significant paradigm shift in journalism education.

In this context, the present on-going research would focus on an important research question: What are the factors affecting Malaysian undergraduates when choosing journalism course? The research is undertaken for SEGi University and nearing completion. The findings reported in this paper is preliminary. Only relevant data would be used for the preliminary report here. As such, the discussion in this report would not be exhaustive.

### **Research Methodology**

The research method used in this study is quantitative survey. A set of survey questionnaires has been designed using purposive sampling and distributed to 300 undergraduate students pursuing Bachelor in Communication or Media studies in Klang Valley, Malaysia. The respondents are from five noted private higher learning institutions in Malaysia. The questionnaire were rendered personally using research assistants whereby the respondents were chosen based on the criteria that there are mass communication students.

Participants who signed the consent forms were asked to fill out the survey questionnaire. The questionnaire contains two sections – demographics, and their reasons for pursuing or not pursuing a career in journalism, adapted from Hanna and Sanders (2007). Sample statements of non- pursuance include “Journalism is, in itself, unattractive as a career”, “Journalism is unattractive because of low

wages” and “Journalism is unattractive because of job demands.” However, if the students were keen on pursuing a career in journalism, the sample statements will include “Journalism is attractive because of the non-routine work”, “Journalism is a creative occupation” and “Journalism is a self-education profession.” The participants will be asked to state their agreements for each items on a five-point Likert Scale where 1 represents strongly disagree while on the other continuum, 5 represents strongly agree. To measure the reliability of the scale, a Cronbach Alpha test was performed after the completion of the pilot study.

Sections in the questionnaire were analyzed and tabulated by using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The demographic data will be summarized using charts and descriptive statistics while the push and pull factors will be established through percentages and cross tabulations.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### *Reliability analysis*

| Cronbach's Alpha | No. of Items |
|------------------|--------------|
| 0.908            | 35           |

The reliability analysis using Cronbach's Alpha of 35 items in the questionnaire showed high validity with  $r = 0.908$ . The questions were hence found to be highly reliable.



### *Demographic Analysis*

| Age               | Frequency | Valid Percent |
|-------------------|-----------|---------------|
| 18 – 20 years old | 96        | 32            |
| 21 – 23 years old | 164       | 54.7          |
| 24 and above      | 40        | 13.3          |
| Total             | 300       | 100           |

Of the 300 respondents surveyed, almost 55% were aged between 21 and 23 while 32% were between 18 and 20 and 13% who were above 24. The demographic distribution is skewed towards the early 20s probable because of the educational system in Malaysia which allows students to undertake Diploma level education before pursuing their degree courses. Students in Malaysia generally opt for diploma after completing their Form Five education when they are 17 years. After a two-and-half year stint doing Diploma they opt for a Degree course. So they majority of the respondents would have pursued their diploma before entering their degree courses.

| Gender | Frequency | Valid Percent |
|--------|-----------|---------------|
| Male   | 95        | 31.7          |
| Female | 205       | 68.3          |
| Total  | 300       | 100           |

According to collected data, almost 70% of students interviewed were females. This may be due to the population structure of Malaysia where women outnumber men.

| Ethnicity | Frequency | Valid Percent |
|-----------|-----------|---------------|
| Malay     | 210       | 70            |
| Chinese   | 35        | 11.7          |
| Indian    | 46        | 15.3          |
| Others    | 9         | 3             |
| Total     | 300       | 100           |

The ethnicity breakdown shows that 210 or 70% of the respondents were Malays and out of the overall numbers who preferred to do journalism 67% were Malays. This is an interesting finding which shows a different consciousness on journalism among Malay students. However, it is worth noting here that 60% of the Malaysian population comprise Malays.

| University | Frequency | Valid Percent |
|------------|-----------|---------------|
| 1          | 60        | 20            |
| 2          | 60        | 20            |
| 3          | 60        | 20            |
| 4          | 60        | 20            |
| 5          | 60        | 20            |
| Total      | 300       | 100           |

Five private universities were chosen for this survey. They were all accredited with between 4 and 5–tier ranking set by the Malaysian government. A university accorded with 6-tier ranking is deemed excellent, while 5 is considered good. The universities included in this survey are all based in the Klang Valley, the financial hub of Selangor, which is the richest state in Malaysia. The names of the universities are withheld for confidentiality.

| Course  | Frequency | Valid Percent |
|---------|-----------|---------------|
| Degree  | 206       | 68.7          |
| Diploma | 94        | 31.3          |
| Total   | 300       | 100           |

Almost 70% of the respondents for this survey were pursuing a degree in Mass Communication studies.

Is Journalism a preferred major?

The respondents were asked whether journalism was a preferred major. The response received was something which was beyond the overall expectation of the researchers. The results were found to portray an encouraging trend in journalism studies in all the five universities surveyed.

|               | Frequency | Valid Percent |
|---------------|-----------|---------------|
| Preferred     | 147       | 49            |
| Not Preferred | 153       | 51            |
| Total         | 300       | 100           |

A total of 49% chose journalism as their preferred major while 51% did not opt for journalism. These seems somewhat to be a paradox as many of the private universities were currently relegating journalism studies to a non-important category whereby they are not offered as a major subject. The finding somewhat shows that interest in journalism is still strong among undergraduates. This could be because of job opportunities available for journalism students in Malaysia. Out of the 147 who preferred doing journalism, 72% were females. Researchers

could not ascertain why there was a overwhelming interest among female students for journalism.

### Why choose Journalism?

The respondents who opted to do journalism were asked on why they chose to do journalism on 5-point Likert scale. The findings showed a different trend among Malaysia students.

Factors are based on the mean for each question below (Close to 5 mean denotes a strong factor)

| Statement   | Mean |
|---|------|
| Journalism offers opportunities to meet different types of people | 4.1  |
| Journalism allows me to educate the public                        | 3.82 |
| Journalism is a creative occupation                               | 3.77 |
| Journalism offers opportunities to change the society             | 3.75 |
| Journalism provides opportunities to learn from various fields    | 3.73 |
| Journalism offers good job prospects                              | 3.69 |
| Journalism is an exciting field                                   | 3.68 |
| Journalism allows me to monitor public affairs                    | 3.57 |
| Journalism allows me to investigate wrongdoings                   | 3.59 |

Based on the mean above, students opting for journalism studies show a strong inclination to meeting different types of people in the course of their duties. Socialising element may seem to attract students into journalism. This is an interesting finding as many would expect students to opt for journalism because they would want to change the

world through their writings. This again may also indicate the preferences of Generation Y who seem to be social animals. They always show a propensity to interact with people. 3.

The need to educate the public seems to be the next important reason why students preferred journalism. This is quite understandable as the young generation are now exposed to various anomalies and wrongdoings in society and as such, they may play the role of educators, highlighting important issues in society.

There is also an admiration for the job among students who opt for journalism. Sizeable number consider journalism as a creative occupation. This could be mainly due to exposure to media outlets which offers opportunities for creativity.

In contrast to general assumption, consideration on journalism offering good job prospects is not given much importance. It only shows a moderate mean reading of 3.69. This could be the result of current issues in Malaysia that may have altered the worldview of undergraduates bent on taking up journalism as their career.

Journalism considered to be an exciting field is placed on the lower rung of importance with a moderate mean of 3.68. Undergraduates may be overpowered by the demands of the job and other considerations when they do not feel excited about the job.

There is also small interests in students opting to journalism to investigate on wrong doings.

### *Perception on Journalism*

The respondents were also asked on their overall perception of journalism and there were no strong indications of them being satisfied with the quality of journalism education in the five institutions. To the statement “I am satisfied with the quality of journalism education in my institution” a moderate mean of 3.81 was registered. In contrast, there was a strong indication when students agreed that their institutions prepared them with skills needed for journalism career. Generally, they agreed that their institutions are providing them with the required exposure in journalism.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The findings reported in this paper is only preliminary. Reasons for not choosing journalism were not included in this analysis. The survey showed that female students show a higher propensity in choosing journalism compared with males and respondents were not idealistic about journalism when choosing the course. Although they showed an interest in the job, agreeing that it was a creative job, they showed a strong inclination to socialize while engaging in journalism. This seemed to be the uppermost reason in their minds when opting for journalism.

This study did not look into journalism curriculum as a possible factor affecting students’ choice on journalism. Perhaps future research could factor this in. It is also felt that a mixed research method could be used in future to delve into the actual reasons for opting or not opting for journalism studies.

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