EXAMINING CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIA:
Critical Knowledge From Research

Volume 2    Jilid 2
RESEARCH KNOWLEDGE & INTELLECT APPLICATION SERIES
SIRI ILMU PENYELIDIKAN & APLIKASI INTELEK

UiTm
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EXAMINING CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIA: Critical Knowledge From Research

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UfoRIA (Unit for Research and Intellect Application)
Universiti Teknologi MARA
Seri Iskandar
32610 Perak
Malaysia

Web: uforia.edu.my

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Foreword

This UfoRIA Research Knowledge and Intellect Application series has been evaluated and edited by a panel of expert and professional reviewers from within and outside the UiTM system. Most of the articles/papers in this special series has been presented at the ‘Kontemporari’ seminar series both at the state and national levels. A few articles/papers have even been presented and shared at regional and international seminar and conferences.

The articles/papers selected for this second volume discusses contemporary and also critical issues that need to be carefully examined and further researched by the academic community in Malaysia. This cycle of research effort and knowledge dissemination is a never-ending journey as we strive to make knowledge and learning more that just academic culture.

It is hoped that this Research Knowledge and Intellect Application series would continue the knowledge acculturation initiative that was started in 2002 when UfoRIA was born. This is the second out of two books, one in Malay and this particular volume in English, edited and published by the Unit for Research and Intellect Application (UfoRIA) with the support of the Campus Director of UiTM Seri Iskandar, Perak, Malaysia.
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Assessing and revising tertiary programs in the Malaysian context: the experience of the Faculty of Office Management and Technology, UiTM

Dr. Norlida Mohd Noor & Khiriah Ibrahim
Faculty of Office Management and Technology,
Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Bandar Seri Iskandar Campus, 32610 Bota, Perak

ABSTRACT

Periodic assessment of goals is critical in maintaining an academic program. One of the goals set by the Faculty of Office Management and Technology, University Technology MARA (UiTM) is to produce employable graduates. The Faculty is committed to keeping its curricula up-to-date. It is the objective of the Faculty to find out what skills are needed in the workplace so that students are equipped with the tools to go out and apply their skills to the job they enter. A review of curriculum was made between 1998 and 2000 that proposed a new model of secretarial training for UiTM, one in which English language, information and communications technology, office administrative/managerial skills and on-the-job training is the focal skill areas in the curriculum. With this new curriculum the name of the program was therefore changed from a ‘Diploma in Executive Secretary’ (SS14) to a ‘Diploma in Office Management and Technology’ (OM114). This change was thought necessary if the needs of the target group of students are to continue to be met during their training and if they are successfully to compete with graduates from other institutions for local employment. This new program is responsive to the labor market but at the same time rooted in the needs of students and principles which underpin good education and training. Since the curriculum revision in the year 2000 there has not been a formal survey conducted therefore no indicator has been used to assess the effectiveness of this revised program.
INTRODUCTION

Some of the current issues that need to be addressed by the Faculty are:

- Unemployment rate amongst higher learning institutions graduates is quite worrying.
- A survey carried out by the Research and Development Office, UiTM showed that only 45.4% of OM114 graduates secured employment immediately after graduation. It is assumed that the other 54.6% of graduates would either be in a degree program or still seeking employment.
- There is a national need to increase the number of student enrolment in UiTM in the next 10 years.
- Alternate route programs that provide financial assistance for university students.
- Higher-order thinking skills become more important as we move from a production economy to an information economy.

The above issues would definitely have an impact on the training provided by the Faculty and this study would therefore be conducted to ascertain the revised program’s effectiveness. Among others, this study will look into:

- Have the career paths of the revised program alumni changed since the 1997 survey?
- To compare salaries with salaries from the 1997 survey to determine if current graduates are financially better than their peers who graduated with the Executive Secretarial diploma program.
- Are the graduates satisfied with the training they had received and how they view the adequacy and appropriateness of the program?
- Are the graduating students satisfied with the training they receive in preparing them for a career or advanced study?
- Are the employers of the OM114 graduates satisfied with the caliber of work performed by the graduates?
- To ask employers if, given a choice, would they prefer to hire a graduate with a diploma in Executive Secretaryship (SS14) or a diploma in Office Management and Technology (OM114)?

Currently the enrolment of students undergoing the Diploma in Office Management and Technology (OM114) program is 2,644 located at five of the University’s fourteen state campuses. The growing number of OM114 diploma
awarded has been encouraging. During 2003 - 2005, 2,409 OM114 diplomas were awarded. But not much is known about what happens to these graduates after they receive their diplomas. Do these graduates find employment in fields for which they are trained? Do OM114 recipients experience more successful career lives than those with SS14 diploma (old program) revealed in the 1997 survey?

METHODOLOGY

This study sought to assess the effectiveness of a revised executive secretarial program offered by the Faculty of Office Management and Technology, University Technology MARA (UiTM). For this study it was thought that an approach using a range of surveys was appropriate to gain the different perspectives of employers, graduates, and graduating students. In the researchers' view a range of different studies was required because it was necessary to identify the issues generated by the different studies. Surveys were carried out for this purpose: A Survey of Graduates; a Survey of Employers; and a Survey of Graduating Students.

Data Collection Methods

The three major data collection methods used were questionnaires (surveys of graduates, employers, and students). Since the surveys of graduates and employers are large scale surveys, postal questionnaires were used because these are the cheapest way of gathering information. Questionnaires were developed by the researchers after reviewing similar studies carried out in the United States of America.

Attempts were made to ensure high returns of questionnaires by enclosing stamped addressed return envelopes for respondents to use in returning the completed questionnaires. Follow-up letters were also sent to remind respondents to complete and return the questionnaires. As for the survey of graduating students, questionnaires were distributed to them and collected by hand.
FINDINGS

Survey of Graduates

This study examined the nature and extent of career development amongst the revised Executive Secretarial diploma program which is now known as the Diploma in Office Management and Technology. It also examined the nature of work performed by graduates and the relationship between the training received by them and the skills and qualities needed to function effectively and efficiently in their jobs as office administrators.

Between July 2003 and July 2005, 2409 students graduated with the Diploma in Office Management and Technology (OM114) from the Faculty of Office Management and Technology, UiTM. A list of graduates' names and home addresses was obtained from the Records and Admissions Office at UiTM.

From the total of 2409 graduates in OM114 between July 2003 and July 2005, 1205 questionnaires were sent out with a return rate of 20.17% (243 returned questionnaires). Questionnaires were distributed to graduates, regardless of the area of residence. It was felt that a return rate of 20.17% was accepted given the fact that graduates move homes without informing the Alumni Office in UiTM and it was not possible to trace those who had moved from the last known address. The only concern generated by this small sample of graduates (243 graduates) being surveyed was the extent to which the findings could be generalized to the population of all graduates from UiTM.

The questionnaire asked for the characteristics of respondents in terms of gender, job title, job title of supervisor, average weekly working hours, month and year of graduation, UiTM branch campus where they received their training from, time actively spent seeking employment, number of years/months with the present organization, monthly salary range, location of organization, company size, sector of employment, the type of organization, and the number of staff respondents supervised.

Question 19 of the questionnaire asked the types of computer applications used by respondents and the approximate amount of time spent on the different types of computer software.
In question 20 a list of administrative/managerial activities was presented in order to establish the range of activities performed in the jobs. Question 21 asked about the effectiveness of the training they had received at UiTM. For the list of skills provided, respondents were asked to select one of the three conditions – they were ‘well-trained but the skills and knowledge were not being utilized fully’, or they were ‘well-trained and the skills and knowledge were being fully utilized’, or they were ‘undertrained and had to acquire more skills and knowledge in their present positions’. Respondents were further asked to indicate, from a list presented in question 22, the types of training experiences provided by their employers.

Respondents were also asked to give their opinions, suggestions, and comments on the training they had received at UiTM. Respondents were asked to provide the researchers with their companies’ addresses for their employers to be included in the study.

Since we need a sufficiently large sample to assure that these groups are represented in large enough numbers to make analysis possible and due to the small sample size obtained in this study, data was only examined through the use of frequency distribution tables and the percentages of the number of cases in each category.

It was found that only 12 (4.9%) of the respondents were male and 231 (95.1%) were female who graduated from UiTM between July 2003 and July 2005. 37 (15.2%) had spent no time seeking employment, having been offered jobs before completing their training at UiTM. 36 (14.8%) had spent less than one month seeking employment and 83 (34.2%) respondents had waited for more than three months before gaining employment.

Only 83 (34.16%) of the respondents worked as office administrators in posts of administrative assistant to personal assistant and 69 (28.4%) respondents were employed in non-related occupation.

Monthly salaries ranged from Malaysian Ringgit (RM) 501 to more than RM2500 with an average salary of RM1500. The salary mean for job titles of respondents were calculated. Higher ranking positions had higher salary means compared to lower ranking positions. The fact that graduates in higher
ranking positions received better salaries could be due to the number of years’ experience they had, or simply that they were employed in organizations that offered better salary scales.

Of the 243 respondents, 99 (40.7%) worked in organizations of less than 50 employees and 61 (25.1%) in organizations of more than 500 employees. More than half of the respondents (58%) worked in the private sector and 65 (26.7%) worked either in the government or semi-government sectors.

In terms of the type of organization, the largest proportion of respondents, 86 (35.4%) worked in services, 31 (12.8%) in manufacturing/engineering, and 19 (7.8%) in construction.

It was found that 142 (58.4%) respondents were without staff to supervise, 34 (14.0%) had between one and three number of staff they supervised, and the remaining 33 (13.6%) had more than three staff to supervise.

The section of the survey that aimed to determine the types of computer applications used by graduates and how much of their time was spent on each type of software, Microsoft Word being the most popular software being used ‘everyday’ by 161 (66.3%) of the respondents. Microsoft Excel is also used ‘everyday’ by 112 (46.1%) of the respondents. Microsoft Outlook is another software used ‘everyday’ by 50 (20.6%) of the respondents. Macromedia Dreamweaver MX is ‘never’ used by a large number of the respondents (73.7%).

In order to see if graduates’ job functions went beyond clerical and secretarial duties respondents were asked to indicate any administrative/managerial activities that they had performed in the office. These were categorized as planning and organizing activities, directing and supervising activities, and controlling activities. More than half or nearly half of the respondents planned and organized activities such as planning filing system (67.9%), ordering office supplies (47.7%), and designing forms (46.5%). For directing and supervising activities, 32.1% of the respondents delegated routine activities to subordinates. More than half of respondents performed controlling activities such as greeting/screening visitors (67.1%).
A section of the survey aimed to investigate graduates’ perceptions of the training they had received from UiTM in relation to the demands of their jobs. A list of skill areas was presented and three options were given for respondents to indicate whether they were ‘well-trained for the skills and knowledge but the skills and knowledge were not being utilized fully’, or whether they were ‘well-trained and the skills and knowledge were being fully utilized’, or whether they were ‘undertrained and had to acquire more skills and knowledge’.

It was found that on the whole, more than half of the respondents were of the opinion that, except for skills in handling conflict, leadership, interviewing, organizing events, and editing, they were well-trained in all the skills specified and that these skills were being fully utilized at the time of the survey.

For the skill of leadership 44 (20.8%) respondents felt that they were undertrained and more skills/knowledge had to be acquired. And 45 (21.5%) respondents felt the same for the skill of interviewing.

When respondents were asked to indicate the types of training provided by their employers it was found that the most frequent types of training attended by respondents were in communication (46.9%), followed by computing (47.8%), management (44.7%), and office administration (43.4%). Those respondents who were pursuing studies and still seeking employment were not included in the data analysis.

Where respondents were asked to give their comments and suggestions on additional preparation/skills that they felt needed, 28 respondents suggested that more emphasis should be made to handling office equipment/technology/computer. Other skills that respondents suggested should be emphasized were communication skills and English language skills.

Survey of Employers

An employer survey was conducted with the following objectives: To find out how graduates of the revised program from UiTM fare in their jobs and how employers rate their skills and qualities level; to determine the skills and personal attributes employers most wanted to see in office administrators in
current job performance; and to determine the kinds of additional training being provided by employers for office administrators.

A questionnaire was sent to the 57 employers identified by the Survey of Graduates with a response rate of 100%.

Data for the study were collected through a set of confidential questionnaire developed by the researchers. 57 questionnaires were mailed to employers of graduates. These were the graduates surveyed in the Graduate Survey. Not all respondents in the Graduate Survey provided the researchers with the names and addresses of their employers.

The specific knowledge and skills listed in the questionnaire were selected as they were knowledge and skills normally expected in office administrators. These knowledge and skills were also included in UiTM curriculum and the survey aimed to investigate how graduates were thought to perform in the knowledge and skills in which they were trained. The ratings given by employers would serve as a feedback as to whether UiTM was putting sufficient emphasis on a particular knowledge and skills.

Employers were asked to rate a list of knowledge and skills on a five point scale (1 = unacceptable; 2 = poor; 3 = average; 4 = good; and 5 = excellent). Where employers were unable to rate the knowledge and skills of their office administrators employers either responded “unable to rate” or simply did not respond to the particular knowledge or skill.

Based on the ratings given to graduates by employers in all the knowledge and skills, on the whole, the ratings improved from the survey carried out in 1997. Graduates were better regarded in the ability to demonstrate information technology (computer) skills, the ability to work effectively as a member of a team, and the ability to adapt to change and be flexible.

89.5% of the employers were either satisfied or very satisfied with the job performance of their office administrators.

Almost all employers had provided training or planned to provide training for their office administrators. More than half of the graduates had been
given training in areas such as telephone techniques, communication, human relations, and grooming/social etiquette. More than half of the employers surveyed planned to provide training in supervisory and leadership to their office administrator in the near future. This is probably to prepare office administrators for higher job positions.

When employers were asked to make comparison of the old secretarial program to the new office administrative program, 35.1% of the respondents were unable to evaluate. Employers were unable to make comparison as they did not employ or supervise graduates from the old program and therefore was unable to see the difference. 40.4% of employers were in the opinion that the revised program was a better program as compared to the old one.

More than half (61.4%) of the employers surveyed preferred the revised program to the old program. And 35.1% were unable to make comparison. Again this is due to employers surveyed not hiring graduates of the old program.

When employers were asked to provide important attributes they look for in an office administrator, not many of the respondents provided this information. 43.86% of the employers gave high level of commitment as an important attribute, 31.58% looked for good attitude, 24.56% the ability to work independently, and another 24.56% require an office administrator who was proactive.

Survey of Graduating Students

The Exit Survey was conducted to provide a continuing Faculty performance assessment of the revised program for the purpose of program improvement. This survey provides students’ perceptions on a variety of program elements related to their study as well as the students’ overall experience during their training at UiTM.

This Exit Survey included students from Diploma in Office Management and Technology (OM114) who were graduating either in November 2005 or June 2006 studying at four branch campuses namely Shah Alam, Perak, Terengganu, and Pahang.
Data for the study were collected through a set of confidential questionnaire developed by the San Francisco State University but changed to meet the requirements of the OM114 program and UiTM. 248 questionnaires were distributed and collected by hand with a response rate of 100%.

Only 37 (14.9%) of the respondents were male and 211 (85.1%) were female with an average age of 21. 44.4% of the respondents studied at UiTM Perak branch, 30.2% at UiTM Pahang branch and the smallest number of students studied at UiTM Shah Alam.

Looking at respondent’s cumulative grade point average (CGPA) it can be seen that 41.5% of the respondents were with CGPA of above 3.00 and 41.1% of the respondents were with CGPA of between 2.51 and 3.00.

Of the 248 students surveyed 48.0% of the respondents planned to take up a degree course upon completion of the program.

Respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction level on a five point scale (1 = very dissatisfied; 2 = somewhat dissatisfied; 3 = neither satisfied nor dissatisfied; 4 = somewhat satisfied; 5 = very satisfied) on various elements that relate to their program and university.

Students responding to the survey appeared to be satisfied with the scheduling of classes, overall quality of instruction, access to lecturers, quality of advice on course work, overall quality of assistance provided by faculty, the opportunities for useful non-classroom experiences, and the quality of facilities and equipment.

Students responding to the survey also appeared to be satisfied with the class size, lecturers that were genuinely interested in student welfare, the opportunities to participate in projects/internships/community service, and would recommend this program to others. Only students from Perak branch campus seemed to disagree with the class size. Students agreed that the program provided a sense of competence and that it provided the foundation for degree study. This is important as we saw earlier that nearly half of the students planned to advance their study after graduation.
Students were in the opinion that the overall experience in preparing them for life in general were more than moderately useful. A higher mean was recorded for the usefulness of the education at the Faculty in preparing students for a career. As well as the usefulness of education provided by the Faculty in preparing students for a degree program.

CONCLUSIONS

Similar patterns can be seen of graduates in the 1997 survey and this survey where graduates were employed in middle ranking secretarial positions and office administrators. As with the 1997 survey graduates did not have to wait long for employment and the average monthly salary was RM1500. Most respondents were employed in private companies with less than 500 employees specializing in services. And as with the 1997 survey, respondents in the private sector were more highly paid than those in government and semi-government sectors.

Since a sufficiently large sample is needed to assure that graduates surveyed are representative of all graduates from UiTM, further studies on UiTM graduates will need to be carried out with a high return rate to establish the kinds of duties and responsibilities of office administrators. However, before such a study could be carried out the Alumni Office at UiTM will need to update the mailing list of graduates to make any tracing of graduates possible. Traditionally graduates who lived in rural parts of Malaysia moved out of their homes to work in cities.

Of the 243 returned questionnaires from the Survey of Graduates only 57 graduates provided the researchers with their employers’ names and addresses. One might have the impression that those graduates who had given their employers' addresses to be surveyed were those most likely to receive good performance reports from their employers. Therefore the findings in this survey may not portray a true picture of graduates’ skills/qualities and job performance ratings by employers.

The sample size of the Employer Survey was also too small to be regarded as representative of all employers of UiTM OM114 graduates. The Faculty
will need to establish a way of interacting with employers’ of the Faculty graduates to get more information on employer’s perceptions toward the Faculty’s graduates in terms of their skills, qualities, and job performance. These employers would also be able to furnish the Faculty with information on what skills and qualities are needed of newly recruited office administrators as well as the skills and qualities expected of office administrators going for promotion. Such information would not only feed into the UiTM program planning to groom students to become job-entry office administrators but would also prepare students for their career advancement.

Compared to the study carried out in 1997 where graduates were rated low by their employers in areas such as communication skills, computing skills, and the ability to work independently, this study reported an improved ratings by employers on all areas listed including communication skills, computing skills, and graduates’ ability to work independently. Employers felt that the revised program was a better program as compared to the previous program and this can be seen where employers rated satisfied with graduates’ job performance and that they would prefer to hire graduates of the revised program than those graduates from the old program.

Students responding to the Exit Survey appeared to be very satisfied with the content and structure of their program, the overall quality of instruction, and their access to lecturers. Students were also satisfied with the quality of facilities and equipment such as classrooms and computer labs. In general, they believed their courses reflected current trends in the field and that diploma requirements were relevant to their professional goals. The development or enhancement of their critical thinking, written, and oral communication skills was perceived favorably by respondents. A majority of respondents stated their education had been very useful in preparing them for life in general and for career or advanced studies. More than half of the respondents indicated that they were very satisfied with their overall experience at the Faculty, and would recommend the program to others who are interested in their field of study.

It appeared that the revised program that moved the Faculty from the technical, narrow and passive curriculum towards a curriculum that is broader, more open, and empowering and are focused on sending out graduates with the capability
and motivation to achieve administrative and managerial level positions has been effective.

REFERENCE

7. New Sunday Times, March 20, 2005