



Students' "Communication skill" Training Preferences at Dr. Rajendra Prasad Central Agricultural University, India

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Professional communication skills are one of the major requirements in today's world for placement in public or private sector.
- The students (future job aspirants) preferred the short and intensive communication skills development training program organized at the college/university premises.
- The students preferred the industry professionals or HR experts as the trainers of the future training programs.
- The students indicated that they would prefer small group of participants during the training.

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ABSTRACT

The study attempted to explore the preferences of the students enrolled in a Central Agricultural University of India (Dr. Rajendra Prasad Central Agricultural University) regarding future communication skills training programs from their placement point during 2024. Soft skills (especially the professional communication skills) have become one of the mandatory criteria for placement in contemporary India. It is quite insufficient to secure a job only based on the hard skills or knowledge as achieved throughout the degree program. This issue has received a tremendous attention by the different educational institutions in agriculture and allied sectors. 100 students from RPCAU were the respondents of this study, and they were asked to indicate their preferences regarding the future professional communication skills training sessions as conducted by the university's placement cell. The students indicated their preferences regarding content, venue and duration of the future trainings, training participants' size, time of the trainings, various methods used during those trainings, trainer types etc. The comprehensive view of the students' preferences regarding the future soft skills trainings and this research study will be highly beneficial for the university administrators to sketch out the roadmap for future professional skills development trainings for the university students.

INTRODUCTION

Students are the most viable and lively section of population irrespective of any nation and the progress as well as upliftment of students would duly determine the progress of a community or a nation (Meinam et al., 2023). It is observed that most of the training conducted are not based on participatory need assessment, instead major focuses remains on the coverage of training curriculum

(Arunkumar et al., 2021). But the unemployment amongst the youths across the globe is becoming a vital issue in this current century, and it is mostly attributed to the lack of required skill sets amongst the new college graduates. The employers in the modern world are not only interested in the academic achievement and hard knowledge of the university or college graduates, but they are also significantly looking for generic skills or "soft skills" of the job aspirants (Ahmad, 2012). The university graduates, who are mostly

the job seekers, are the applicants for different types of jobs. Those fresh graduates are gaining hard knowledge of various disciplines through the course of their study at a college or university, but there was less focus on the “soft skills” development of the college students, particularly in India and other south Asian countries (Chithra, 2013; Bharathi, 2016). Indian agricultural universities and their constituent colleges are not an exception as well. As the employers in the current time are significantly emphasizing the needs of “soft skills” amongst the job applicants or college graduates, the educational institutions including colleges and universities are considering the inclusion of “soft skills” development training or courses in the curriculum (Cleland et al., 2005).

The students at various agricultural universities in India previously applied as well as were selected in various public sector jobs and “soft skills” were rarely considered in those jobs. But currently, the gradual emphasis of “soft skills” in the selection process has pushed the job aspirants to become sufficiently strong in soft skills. Various employers and executives emphasized “communication skills” as the fundamentally important soft skill apart from integrity of the job seekers or candidates (Ihmeideh et al., 2010; Arunachalam et al., 2020). Stephenson et al., (2015) indicated that persons with strong interpersonal skills will always be preferred much by the employers across various disciplines. In the job-seeking process, the professional communication skills play a vital role, and the candidates get tested by the employers during the recruitment process. It was found that one in five employers globally cannot recruit new candidates as the candidates have significant deficit of various soft skills including the interpersonal communication skills (Manpower Group, 2013). There is a requirement of generating as well as introducing special courses for the undergraduate students, so that they can learn and gain some practical experiences of professional communication skills (Robles, 2012). So, the colleges and universities in the contemporary world are focusing in introducing additional professional development courses and training programs to improve the professional communication skills of the students. Understanding the students’ preferences regarding the future training sessions is important in order to elevate the degree of students’ participation in those training sessions. This research study tried to investigate the preferences of the enrolled students at Dr. Rajendra Prasad Central Agricultural University (RPCAU) regarding such future training programs.

METHODOLOGY

Dr. Rajendra Prasad Central Agricultural University (RPCAU) which is one of the 3 central agricultural universities in India was selected purposively for this research study. Dr. Rajendra Prasad Central Agricultural University is a premier agricultural education institution in India with a strong base of students from different Indian states and abroad as well. This institution and the location “Pusa” also possess a rich historical background since British colonial period. RPCAU was chosen purposively for this study because the researchers were closely connected with RPCAU, and it is also a prestigious “*Institute of National Importance*” as declared by Govt. of India previously.

The principal objective of this research study was to gather and understand the suggestions or preference of the university students enrolled at RPCAU, Pusa regarding the future professional communication or soft skills-based training workshops/programs organized by RPCAU. A stratified random sampling method, which is a probability sampling technique, was used to select 100 students from Dr. Rajendra Prasad Central Agricultural University, including Undergraduate, Master’s, and PhD students. Here the total no. of respondents is 100 as selected from RPCAU. This study used *ex-post facto* research design. To gather personal suggestions on various aspects related to the organization of future training programs for enhancing professional communication skills, a survey instrument was used, and the data were collected in-person from the student respondents. The pre-tested interview schedule (*i.e.* the survey instrument) was used to collect the data from 100 respondents and the face/content validity was assessed beforehand by the experienced faculty members of Department of Extension Education. These training programs are expected to significantly improve students’ competence and suitability for future placements. Based on students’ suggestions and preferences, upcoming training sessions will be organized in a way that encourages spontaneous participation from most RPCAU students, allowing them to fully benefit from these opportunities.

Suggestions were gathered from the respondents on eight specific aspects of the training, including training methods, the training contents, training venue, group size, duration, timing, trainer’s types, and post-training support for the trainees by university’s placement division. There were several items under each of these broad areas and the respondents indicated their preferences for each of those items under each area. The responses were collected using an instrument having continuum of 4 points *i.e.* Most, moderate, less, not and the collected responses were screened, analyzed as well as segregated quantitatively using descriptive statistical tools thoroughly. Finally, the components of these 8 aspects of communication skills training are ranked based on he calculated weighted mean score. Score 4 was assigned for the “Most” responses, followed by score 3 for “Moderate” responses, score 2 for “Less” responses and score 1 for “Not” responses. Thus, the weighted mean score was calculated for each alternative under all the 8 aspects of a future skill development training. The above statistical analysis of the collected data was performed using SPSS software (v. 26). It helped the researchers to obtain a transparent view about the students’ preferences or suggestions about the future professional communication skills or other soft skills development training programs organized by RPCAU, Pusa.

RESULTS

The student respondents indicated their suggestions on the contents of the future communication skills improvement training programs organized by RPCAU, Pusa. The four key components of communication skills considered were group discussion, personal interviews, writing skills and public speaking. The students’ training content priorities revealed that over 50 per cent of respondents indicated a strong preference for training in public speaking, group discussions, and personal interviews. Fewer than half prioritized writing skill improvement as their top choice. Additionally, the data

shows that nearly all students expressed a preference for training in all four areas, either to a great or moderate extent (Table 1). Notably, the preferred order for organizing the training program is personal interviews first, followed by group discussions, public speaking, and writing skills. Additionally, student respondents were asked to provide suggestions regarding the venue for future training programs aimed at enhancing their professional communication skills. The venue options included locations within the university campus, private training institutes, agricultural research institutes, public training institutes, and university classrooms. A strong preference for holding training programs on the university campus (DRPCAU campus) was expressed by 78 per cent of respondents. Of these, 62 per cent preferred their classrooms, 55 per cent favored an agricultural research institute, 30 per cent opted for a private training institute, and 27 per cent chose a public training institute (Table 1). Notably, 24 per cent of respondents indicated a lower preference for private training institutes. The respondents clearly indicated that the university campus should be the top choice for organizing these types of training programs.

The students were asked about their suggestions on the length of the future training programs. The alternatives of the program durations as provided were 2 days training, 3 days training, 1 day training, 2 weeks training, 1 week training, and above 2 weeks training

session. Thirty-six percent of students showed a strong preference for a one-week training duration, followed by 32 per cent for two weeks, 31 per cent for two days, 30 per cent for more than two weeks, 25 per cent for three days, and 21 per cent for a one-day program. Conversely, 37 per cent of respondents expressed a complete lack of preference for training programs lasting more than two weeks (Table 2). The students' preferences suggest that they favor training programs that are neither too short, like a one-day session, nor too long, exceeding two weeks. It is important to consider this when organizing training programs to ensure high student participation. Overall, the data indicates that most students prefer training programs aimed at improving communication skills to last between three days and one week. Respondents were asked to provide suggestions regarding the ideal group size for training programs aimed at improving their communication skills. The different options of the size of the participants groups were up to 80-100 students, 40-60 students, 20 students, 60-80 students, 20-40 students, and more than 100 students. Seventy-eight percent of students expressed a strong preference for participant groups of 20 or fewer, followed by 28 per cent who preferred groups of 20-40 students. Larger group sizes, such as 40-60, 60-80, or 80-100 students, were favored by only a small number of students, making these preferences negligible. Additionally, 84 per cent of respondents

Table 1. Distribution of respondents as per their suggestion/preference of the future training contents and venue

S.No.	Contents of training	Respondents' Preference(frequency/percentage)				Weighted Mean Score	Rank
		Most	Moderate	Less	Not		
1.	Personal Interview	69(69%)	25(25%)	5(5%)	1(1%)	90.50	I
2.	Group Discussion	51(51%)	39(39%)	9(9%)	1(1%)	85.00	III
3.	Public Speaking	54(54%)	37(37%)	8(8%)	1(1%)	86.00	II
4.	Writing Skills	33(33%)	48(48%)	18(18%)	1(1%)	78.25	IV
	Venue of the training						
1.	Agricultural research institute	55(55%)	39(39%)	5(5%)	1(1%)	87.00	II
2.	Public training institute	27(27%)	63(63%)	9(9%)	1(1%)	79.00	IV
3.	In the university/college classrooms	62(62%)	21(21%)	15(15%)	2(2%)	85.75	III
4.	University/college campus	78(78%)	17(17%)	5(5%)	0(0%)	93.25	I
5.	Private training institute	30(30%)	41(41%)	24(24%)	5(5%)	74.00	V

Table 2. Distribution of respondents according to their suggestion/preference regarding the training programs' duration or length and size of the participant groups in training

S.No.	Length of the training program	Respondents' Preference (frequency/percentage)				Weighted Mean Score	Rank
		Most	Moderate	Less	Not		
1.	1 week training	36(36%)	41(41%)	21(21%)	2(2%)	77.75	I
2.	2 days training	31(31%)	28(28%)	29(29%)	12(12%)	69.50	III
3.	2 weeks training	32(32%)	27(27%)	31(31%)	10(10%)	70.25	II
4.	1 day training	21(21%)	34(34%)	24(24%)	21(21%)	63.75	IV
5.	3 days training	25(25%)	50(50%)	20(20%)	5(5%)	77.75	I
6.	More than 2 weeks training	30(30%)	15(15%)	18(18%)	37(37%)	59.50	V
	Size of the participant groups						
1.	40-60 students	6(6%)	47(47%)	38(38%)	9(9%)	62.50	III
2.	20-40 students	25(25%)	66(66%)	4(4%)	5(5%)	77.75	II
3.	Up to 20 students	78(78%)	11(11%)	7(7%)	4(4%)	90.75	I
4.	More than 100 students	2(2%)	4(4%)	10(10%)	84(84%)	31.00	VI
5.	80-100 students	7(7%)	4(4%)	25(25%)	64(64%)	38.50	V
6.	60-80 students	5(5%)	8(8%)	59(59%)	28(28%)	52.50	IV

were strongly opposed to groups larger than 100, with 64 per cent disfavoring groups of 80-100 students (Table 2). Overall, the data suggests that students overwhelmingly prefer smaller participant groups. Therefore, when organizing training programs, it is important to limit group sizes to 20 students, with an upper limit of 40 in special cases.

The respondents also shared their preferences regarding the training methods used to improve communication skills from a placement point of view. The options of the “methods used in the training programs” were case studies, lecture, activity, demonstration, group discussions, simulation, role playing and panel discussion. Seventy-six per cent of students showed a strong preference for activities as a method used in training programs, followed by 70 per cent for demonstrations, 65 per cent for group discussions, and 60 per cent for both case studies and role-playing. Fifty-two per cent favored simulations, while only 23 per cent preferred lectures, marking it as the least favored method (Table 3). The analysis indicates that students generally preferred most methods but leaned more towards activities, demonstrations, and similar approaches, while lectures were less favored. Therefore, it is important to prioritize methods like activities and demonstrations over lectures, while ensuring a balanced inclusion of all the mentioned methods in the training. The preferences of the students were also sought for the time of conducting such future training programs

and the options of the timings for future training programs were after the midterm exam, after the end term exam, the beginning of the academic year, and just before the completion of the degree program. Fifty-six per cent of students expressed the strongest preference for having the training sessions arranged at the starting of the college academic session, with an equal percentage favoring the period just before completing their degree program (Table 3). Significantly fewer students preferred the program to be held after the mid-term or end-term exams, with these options receiving moderate support. Based on the overall data, it is recommended that the university should organize training programs either at the start of the academic session or right before students complete their degree program.

The students were also asked for their preferences on the trainers’ types invited in the future university organized trainings. Different options of the trainer’s types in the training programs were the resource persons from industry, faculty members of the university, HR experts and senior students/alumni. Seventy-four per cent of students strongly preferred HR experts as trainers, followed by 67 per cent who favored industry-based resource persons, and 42 per cent who preferred senior students or alumni (Table 4). The data indicates that students showed less preference for university faculty members as trainers. Therefore, it is recommended that the university administration should invite HR

Table 3. Distribution of respondents according to their suggestion/preference regarding the communication skills training methods

S.No.	Methods used in the training	Respondents’ Preference (frequency/percentage)				Weighted Mean Score	Rank
		Most	Moderate	Less	Not		
1.	Group Discussion	65(65%)	30(30%)	5(5%)	0(0%)	90.00	III
2.	Activity	76(76%)	19(19%)	5(5%)	0(0%)	92.75	I
3.	Case studies	60(60%)	35(35%)	5(5%)	0(0%)	88.75	IV
4.	Lecture	23(23%)	38(38%)	32(32%)	7(7%)	69.25	VII
5.	Demonstration	70(70%)	26(26%)	4(4%)	0(0%)	91.50	II
6.	Role playing	60(60%)	35(35%)	5(5%)	0(0%)	88.75	IV
7.	Simulation	52(52%)	37(37%)	10(10%)	1(1%)	85.00	V
8.	Panel Discussion	32(32%)	55(55%)	11(11%)	2(2%)	79.25	VI
Time of organising training							
1.	At the starting of the academic year	57(57%)	21(21%)	14(14%)	8(8%)	81.75	I
2.	Before the completion of the degree program	56(56%)	19(19%)	13(13%)	12(12%)	79.75	II
3.	Post end term exam	32(32%)	37(37%)	21(21%)	10(10%)	72.75	IV
4.	Post midterm exam	30(30%)	49(49%)	12(12%)	9(9%)	75.00	III

Table 4. Suggestion/preference regarding the type of trainers involved in future training programs and the type of supports provided by the Placement cell in the post-training period

S.No.	Type of trainers involved in training programs	Respondents’ Preference (frequency/percentage)				Weighted Mean Score	Rank
		Most	Moderate	Less	Not		
1.	Resource persons from industry	67(67%)	27(27%)	5(5%)	1(1%)	90.00	II
2.	Faculty members of the university	25(25%)	41(41%)	31(31%)	3(3%)	72.00	IV
3.	HR experts	74(74%)	20(20%)	5(5%)	1(1%)	91.75	I
4.	Senior students/Alumni	42(42%)	47(47%)	11(11%)	0(0%)	82.75	III
Type of supports provided by the Placement cell after the training programs							
1.	Individual counselling	68(68%)	21(21%)	9(9%)	2(2%)	88.75	II
2.	Provision of ppts	34(34%)	54(54%)	10(10%)	2(2%)	80.00	IV
3.	CDs/Digital materials	35(35%)	55(55%)	8(8%)	2(2%)	80.75	III
4.	Provision of notes	32(32%)	48(48%)	17(17%)	3(3%)	77.25	V
5.	Time to time meeting	71(71%)	23(23%)	4(4%)	2(2%)	90.75	I

experts and industry professionals from reputable institutions or organizations to lead the training programs. Finally, the student respondents were also asked about their preference on the post-training support offered by the RPCAU Placement cell and few options were included like provision of notes, time to time meeting, provision of ppts, CDs/Digital materials and individual counselling. Seventy-one percent of students strongly preferred regular meetings, followed by 68 per cent who favored individual counseling, while fewer respondents notably preferred resources like notes, presentations, CDs, or other digital materials (Table 4). The overall data indicates that students predominantly valued regular meetings and individual counseling. Therefore, when organizing training programs, it is important for the organizers to emphasize these two types of support during the post-training period, in line with students' suggestions.

DISCUSSION

Though the agricultural graduates in India used to have several job availabilities even a few years back, the scenario is getting changed in the contemporary period and there is a growing job crisis for the agricultural graduates too (Arunachalam, 2020). The agriculture and allied sciences graduates are struggling to secure quality jobs currently. There is also a significant increase of the private sectors employers in providing employment to the agriculture graduates. The agricultural university graduates in India are also facing some issues of unemployment or lack of required skills in the current period. Many students in the Indian agricultural universities are having a rural background and they have a significant lacunae of professional communication skills as required for the industry (Hari et al., 2022). It was found in a survey in the United States that 75% of the employers hold a strong opinion that the degree offering institutions like colleges and universities should prioritize the oral as well as written communication skills development training for the enrolled students (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2013). Conducting multiple training sessions by the proper division of the colleges and universities are significantly beneficial towards teaching communication skills to the future job aspirants and that will eventually provide experiential knowledge to the students (Wagner et al., 2002). Arranging proper training on professional skills and soft skills development will be beneficial for the students to adopt the proper communication skills (Anderson, 2014; Bell et al., 2014; Harlak et al., 2008). Ihmeideh et al., (2010) & Cleland et al., (2005) indicated in their studies that having a positive communication environment is quite beneficial to promote a better learning of professional communication skills amongst the students. It is notable that conducting professional communication skills training at a college or university comprises several factors. There are several factors which the organizers or institutions should consider while planning for a future communication skills or soft skills development training like training methods, the training contents, training venue, group size, duration, timing, trainer types, and the post-training support provided by university's Placement Cell etc. The placement cell or the RPCAU administration should understand the perspective of the students to make such training programs successful.

The appropriate training of person can improve process as well as product (Nain & Trikha, 2009), it was quite prominent from the findings that all the contents of professional communication skills training are essential, but the students emphasized the area of personal interview training to be included in the future training sessions. Nearly about 70 per cent of the respondents indicated that personal interview should be a focus of the future trainings. Majority of the student respondents had a preference of having the future trainings inside the college or university premises. This is unexceptionally valid as the students do not spend their own money as well as time to travel far due to such professional development training. The participation of the students will also be more if the training is conducted on campus. The training should vary from 1-3 days, and it should not exceed a week of timeline. Some techniques like activity, group discussion, demonstration etc. should definitely be a part of the future training programs. Students preferred small sized participants group for training as it will be much more convenient for them to get involved in the training program proactively. Besides, the students indicated their greater preference for the industry resource persons or HR professionals from various companies to be invited as the lead trainers for future soft skills or professional communication skills training. These prior assessments will also be beneficial to prepare a training module for the continuing students or the future job seekers.

CONCLUSION

It was found that the university students mostly preferred future training on personal job interviews, university or college campus as the venue of future training programs, 1-3 days as the duration of the future trainings. Besides, it was also found that students indicated their highest preference for activity or practical ways of training as the future training method. Students also suggested to organize such future training programs on improving professional communication skills at the beginning of the academic year or before the completion of their degree programs. They primarily suggested to invite various HR experts and industry resource persons during the future training programs etc. This study helps the Indian agricultural universities and the respective placement cells to reconfigure as well as restructure their mode of actions in terms of planning for future workshops or training sessions for soft skills (or professional communication skills development) of the future job aspirants having an academic background in agriculture and allied sectors.

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