

## **Interview with Dr. Ramesh Vahidi**

MSc Project Management Programme Leader  
Southampton Business School, University of Southampton, UK



***Interviewed by Ömer Berkay Dağlı***  
*Southampton, United Kingdom*

Dr. Ramesh Vahidi leads the MSc in Project Management (PM), which she designed upon joining Southampton University in 2012. She holds a PhD in PM from the former School of the Built and Natural Environment at Northumbria University and a dual MSc (Distinction) in International PM from Northumbria University and Chalmers University in Sweden. She gained her original BEng and MEng degrees in Industrial Engineering respectively from Iran University of Science and Technology and Sharif University of Technology. Between her degrees, she worked with a number of major companies in different industries, namely IT and management consulting in power industry, manufacturing and industrial research. She held project manager, project consultant, project auditor and senior analyst positions in a number of programmes/projects. Following an interest in practical and fundamental research on PM theories, she returned to academia in 2006 for her further degrees, which set the ground for her academic career since. Her fully sponsored PhD research on 'Conceptual framework for trade-off decisions in projects' was granted one of the first PhD awards of the Major Projects Associations (MPA) in 2010 for its impact on the practice of major projects. She is a fellow of HEI and a full member (MAPM) of the Association for Project Management (APM) and has been a committee member of their Wessex Branch and HEI representative since 2012. She has presented, chaired and reviewed for national and international conferences on project management and technology management. She is involved in research projects for PM professional bodies.

*Today, we have a successful and enthusiastic guest who is educating future project managers; Dr. Ramesh Vahidi. She designed and leads the MSc in Project Management Programme in University of Southampton since 2013.*

**Ömer Berkay Dağlı (Dağlı):** *Dear Dr. Vahidi. First of all, thank you very much for accepting the interview request which is also the first experience of mine. Please introduce yourself for PM World Journal readers, and firstly how did you get involved with Project Management?*

**Dr. Ramesh Vahidi (Vahidi):** Thank you for having me and I am glad to be your first interviewee! From the start of my career, I mainly worked on various projects and programmes due to the nature of my initial backgrounds, i.e. Industrial Engineering. And in terms of academic involvement, after working in several companies, I returned to academia for studying project management (PM) with some burning questions, basically around the relations between and relevance of theories and practice. I actually have been finding this field more and more interesting as I proceed!

**Dağlı:** *As the Programme Leader of Project Management MSc Programme, what is your role?*

**Vahidi:** It involves a wide range of responsibilities in different areas. It basically started with curriculum design (modules and the MSc programme). Thereafter, on a regular basis, it includes making and supporting admission decisions; holding inductions for the new cohort; keeping the programme contents and specifications updated; preparing annual reports; attending and contributing to School's Postgraduate (PG) Programme Boards; responding to external examiner's reports; working with admin and quality colleagues to run the programme and ensure its quality; monitoring the cohort's progress and taking action if required; supporting and responding to various students' requests; and working with colleagues to keep our library resources updated.

As the main aim of the role is enhancing students' experience, some important though less tangible aspects of the role are trying to keep students motivated and encouraging them to do their best and preparing them for their future careers. These could take different forms such as creating various opportunities for linking them to the professional world and enhancing their employability as far as possible.

**Dağlı:** *I know that you designed the program, what was the most challenging and enjoyable thing in this process?*

**Vahidi:** I generally enjoy doing things from scratch as we do in projects! Now that I look back, doing the comprehensive market study, designing the programme for marketability and embedding contemporary PM approaches into the design were the most enjoyable and interesting parts of the process.

Of course, I could not say that going through the paper work for approval was as enjoyable as the design itself! After all these, the big challenge was waiting to see whether the programme could recruit enough and then could work well in practice or not.

**Dağlı:** *Could you tell me more about the Programme you lead and the University of Southampton?*

**Vahidi:** Of course! This is a one-year MSc in Project Management (PM), which is running for the fourth year. It has been steadily recruiting a fairly large cohort from about thirty countries - four continents and with very diverse educational and professional backgrounds so far – supposedly, not too bad for a young programme as this! Its foundations and core ideas originated from the contemporary perspectives on PM with an emphasis on developing skills required in the real world. Among the core ideas were that PM is a pan-sector (rather than industry specific as APM puts it) and multidisciplinary field and enough emphasis should be put on soft aspects of managing by projects.

The programme offers a wider range of options to suit the diversity of cohorts' previous backgrounds and interests. The compulsory modules try to link theories to practice of project management as far as possible. It highly welcomes applicants with work experience and receives such applications frequently. The MSc started to get external acknowledgments from organizations dealing with major projects from the first year and also was successful in securing a full scholarship from the Commonwealth Scholarship Scheme. It has also established close collaboration with PM Professional bodies through time to ultimately enrich the students' experiences.

**Dağlı:** *What makes your school different from the others?*

**Vahidi:** We are among the top 1% universities world-wide and one of the prestigious research-intensive Russell Group universities in the UK. Southampton Business School (SBS) has recently gained AACSB accreditation, which is held only by less than 5% of the business schools across the world, besides its previously held AMBA accreditation.

Our strong and growing links with companies considered as business leaders provide chances for disseminating and putting in practice our world-class research. The research is dominantly (more than 96% based on the outcome of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2014 assessment) world-leading and internationally excellent. SBS is also known for its unique interdisciplinary environment and approach, reflected in our MSc programmes.

**Dağlı:** *How do you use your project management experience for PM education?*

**Vahidi:** This is an interesting question, thanks for asking! I would certainly say my understanding of PM and approaches to teaching could have been significantly different if I had not experienced the challenges and realities of actual project and programme environments myself.

When working in industry, I used to look for solutions to our project problems in PM textbooks and started to realise the distance between what I observed and what I read (which were generally normative, rule based and definitive 'science' of basically managing time and cost and tangible resources). This became the very reason I returned to academia to see how one could link theories to the realities. Fortunately,

becoming familiar with the works of pioneers in 'rethinking project management' and then the growing literature in line with those happened at the right time. Hence, these have led me to embed and link actual cases and real-world examples in my teaching in order to put the relevant theories into the appropriate context. They also made me very cautious and selective in literature I use and suggest to students. One other main point is trying ways to familiarize students with the actual complexities of the real world – rather than simplifying the complexities for the sake of teaching and an impressive mark. This has proved to be a challenge but a rewarding attempt when and where it works!

**Dağlı:** *As a former project manager and current academician, what are the differences between the business world and academic life for you?*

**Vahidi:** Well, this is a tricky question! I suppose it probably depends on how you manage a project or how you teach managing a project, in terms of time, energy and other resources you put into these. In general, I found them both challenging in terms of managing stakeholders' expectations and their demands of your time, resources and attention! While undoubtedly managing projects is a highly demanding (and I would say exciting) job, working in academia has proven not to be any less demanding (unlike the common perception that an academic just teaches for a few hours for a few months and fully enjoys holidays for the rest of their time specially outside the teaching period!). To me, academic work can be very rewarding, due to the number of people you work with.

**Dağlı:** *Could you tell us main factors of successful project management as an academician?*

**Vahidi:** Well, with contemporary approaches to PM and the fact that projects have become more complex, so is their management. I believe the distance between academia and practice is decreasing. Having said these, inevitably we use different languages, so this might not be easily seen. To answer your question, successful PM could depend on numerous factors, including but not limited to the skills and capabilities of the PM and its organization in seeing, understanding and admitting complexities of projects within their context and the extent they could and are willing to handle and deal with these. For all these to happen, perhaps a main factor is a PM should be a 'learner', an analyst and a reflective practitioner. Hope I got your question right and these could partially answer it.

**Dağlı:** *What hot topics or trends in the project management field have you noticed, that might be important enough for future research?*

**Vahidi:** PM has numerous knowledge areas, due to the uniqueness and variety of projects, a few or several knowledge areas might become more relevant and significant than others in certain circumstances. A quick look at the PM journals (not their special issues of course) could provide a picture of the wide range of research topics and areas growing in parallel. Anyway, it would perhaps be easy to note that soft aspects are under the spotlight.

**Dağlı:** *Finally, what do you suggest to current and future project managers?*

**Vahidi:** Trying to appreciate and acknowledge the realities, complexities and multiplicity of projects and their contexts rather than ignoring and/or simplifying them to the level we could easily understand and deal with. Sometimes being successful at what we do does not only depend on what we know but on understanding and acknowledging we do not know all we need to know! This opens doors for learning and reflecting.

**Dağlı:** *Thank you.*

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## About the Interviewer



### **Ömer Berkay Dağlı**

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**Ömer Berkay Dağlı** is currently a Masters Candidate at Southampton Business School, University of Southampton, based in UK for the academic year 2017-2018. Previously, he has served as an Officer on Watch for over 30 months on board chemical tankers, based in different routes around the world where he served as Third and Second Officer. He completed his graduation in Marine Transportation Management dual diploma with honours from both Istanbul Technical University, Turkey and State University of New York Maritime College, USA in 2014. His major fields of study are project management, logistics and inter-modal transportation. His research interests include global project management, leadership, uncertainty management, programme and portfolio management, strategic PM, PM governance, stakeholders, project control and PM in the transportation and logistics industries. Omer served as a [research intern for the PM World Library](#) during January 2018, completing the program in record time. He can be contacted at [omerberkaydagli@gmail.com](mailto:omerberkaydagli@gmail.com)