

7-2001

Work experience at major events: Is it worth the bother?

R. Patching

Queensland University of Technology

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme>

Recommended Citation

Patching, R., Work experience at major events: Is it worth the bother?, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 11, 2001, 129-140.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss11/10>

Work Experience At Major Events: Is It Worth The Bother?

Tertiary journalism students have had a smorgasbord of work experience opportunities at major sporting events over the past couple of years. But for many - especially those who volunteered for the Sydney 2000 Olympics - the experience was one of disappointment. This paper chronicles some of the major work experience opportunities afforded students in recent times and concludes that a more productive arrangement with event organisers looking for willing helpers from journalism schools need to be put in place to avert disappointing student journalists looking for "real journalism experience".

Roger Patching

Queensland University of Technology

Journalism educators are always on the lookout for appropriate work experience or internship opportunities for their students. Aside from the regular opportunities offered by the local media in New South Wales and Queensland, 2000 and 2001 offered a bumper crop of one-off opportunities to report on major events and watch some of the world's best journalists in action.

Most vocation-based journalism courses produce in-house newspapers and magazines and more recently have taken to publishing their student's work in e-zines and other publications on the Internet. Some courses maintain connections with local, usually public, radio stations to 'air' their students' news and current affairs output. At least two have provided material for their local community television station.

At the 'high end' of these student publications are the award-winning *Queensland Independent* published by the journalism department at University of Queensland (UQ), the national radio news service provided to more than 40 community stations across Australia by journalism students at Charles Sturt University (CSU), Bathurst, and the two six-week blocks of nightly TV news produced by journalism students at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) for local community station, *Briz 31*.

In the mid-90s, of the 22 vocation-based journalism courses across the country, all but five had regular print publications and of that five, two had other 'on-off' showcases for their students'

work; 12 had regular radio outlets for student work, and three provided material for TV stations (Patching, 1997, pp 65-63).

Most journalism schools have formal arrangements, including scholarship schemes, with large and small media organisations in the local area and/or capital cities. In my 20 years of lecturing at Charles Sturt University, I found that more job opportunities arose from work experience at rural and regional media than a few days at a capital city media outlet or a one-off opportunity. Nevertheless, there were memorable 'one off' exercises involving journalism students and capital city media organisations.

For several years through the late 80s and early 90s, CSU's journalism staff had organised a team of student reporters, mainly from the broadcast strand, to cover the Westfield Run, an ultra-marathon between Sydney and Melbourne, providing, among other things, hourly updates for radio stations around the country.

Bond University provided 'wrap around' special editions of the *Gold Coast Bulletin* with news from the PANPA (Pacific Area News Proprietors' Association) conferences on Australia's holiday and conference strip. QUT students have on several occasions played the role of print and broadcast journalists during major Army mock 'invasion' exercises. (Granato & Bowman 1988)

But nothing could compare with the potential learning experience offered by working for the press operations team at the Sydney 2000 Olympics, but which was not realised due to an inadequate work experience framework.

The Head of Press Operations for the Sydney 2000 Olympics (and later for what became the last Goodwill Games, in Brisbane in 2001), former ABC foreign correspondent, Richard Palfreyman, initially made contact with the journalism schools in the greater Sydney area (including Newcastle, Bathurst, Canberra and Wollongong) about 18 months out from the 2000 Olympics seeking interest from first year students, as they would be in the final months of their degree in September, 2000. The SOCOG (Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games) group were also interested in students in their second year, because they would complete their course in the December before the games but realised there may be a large drop-out rate in that group as they found jobs after graduation.

Hundreds of journalism student volunteers offered their services to Press Operations, which looked after mainly the print media (the largest group being photographers) at the Main Press Centre (MPC) at the Olympic site at Homebush Bay, the Venue Press Centres at the various sports-specific venues across Sydney (and the soccer venues in Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane and Canberra) and helped with the Olympic News Service (ONS).

I was involved in organising for CSU students, and later Bond

University. I was offered the role of ONS Supervisor at the sailing venue at Rushcutters Bay marina in Sydney's eastern suburbs.

There were a number of positions on offer for students, from reporting positions with ONS (the most prized) to Flash Quote Reporters (who interviewed athletes in a special area called the Mixed Zone after events and another of the more-prized jobs), Tribune (where the working media watched events) supervisors and runners, photo marshalls (to keep the photographers in their allocated areas) ONS Coordinator (a fancy name for the person who supervises the placing of results in pigeon-holes), Press Conference Supervisors / Assistants and Help Desk (or News Desk) Assistant (question answerer, photocopier and general helper).

In the early days of the preparation, students were encouraged to be involved in the massive Bio Data Research Project, responsible for gathering biographies on more than 10,000 athletes, coaches and trainers among others expected at the games. A core of ONS staff and volunteers were committed to this task for many months in the run-up to September 2000, completing the main task virtually on the day of the Opening Ceremony and updating and correcting material during the games. The bio 'flying squad' (including some students) worked tirelessly on this project right through the games, amassing a huge database.

Initially, Press Operations were looking for 3,000 media volunteers, but not all were expected to be students (Graham, 1999). The approach from the Manager, Press Services, Sue Graham, clearly stated: "We would be looking for next year's third year students to fill more senior roles, with second and first year students taking less senior roles." (Graham, 1999).

The clear expectation of students who were in their final year of journalism study in 2000 (or who may have completed their studies in the previous December) was that they would be allocated the prized reporting positions.

I 'sold' the idea to my students by suggesting that this was a unique opportunity to be involved in the world's biggest sporting event, working alongside the world's best sporting and general journalists. Employers, it was suggested, would be looking at CV's in the future to see if potential employees had taken up the opportunity of very practical work experience offered by the Games.

Many of the final-year students from different journalism courses in the Eastern states had wanted to report for ONS but instead found themselves filling pigeon-holes, running results to the working media and answering inane questions from international journalists who seemed incapable of establishing anything for themselves and seemed to want to be spoon-fed.

(Journalists covering the tennis, for instance, demanded - and got - complete transcripts of all media conferences. This is standard practice on the international tennis circuit, but seemed to me to be a case of intense laziness on the part of the international media. ONS did provide highlights of all major news conferences in both printed and electronic form to add to the 'flash' quotes from competitors immediately after competition).

The sailing journalists seemed to be less independent than other sporting journalists I encountered. They were spoon fed results, overall placing lists, individual race results and pages of flash quotes and news conference highlights. The results service was one of the dual roles of the Olympic News Service. The other was the Olympic News Service itself.

For the past few Olympic games, the Organising Committee has been required to set up an event reporting system for the Olympic family of athletes and officials, but more importantly for the accredited media who are covering several sports and, naturally enough, cannot be in two places at once.

This was where students were to be given the opportunity of reporting on Olympic events. If, for instance, our token international journalist was covering sailing but was out at the athletics venue, he or she could use ONS's computerised 'information retrieval system', Info for short, and with a couple of mouse clicks, read stories on each of the sailing classes that raced that day, usually within about 15 minutes of the completion of the events.

Another major part of the ONS brief was to provide the so-called 'flash quotes' - the brief, post event, interview highlights from key competitors and support staff. Usually, the flash quotes were hand delivered to the journalists watching the competition. Sailing didn't have a central 'Tribune' area (where the media watched competition), since the journalists and photographers were out on the Harbour (or the offshore courses) on up to 19 media boats watching the racing. At other venues, though, the flash quotes were rushed to the working media for inclusion in their running stories. They were also placed in the pigeon-holes at the various venues and the MPC.

The ONS subs desk at the MPC (admittedly paid positions not open to the university student volunteers) was dominated by former staff of Australian Associated Press. ONS was headed by former AAP staffer, Steve Dettre, and run very much like a news agency. For its main purpose - to be the eyes and ears for journalists who were at other venues - it was the logical way to do it. All competitors and events were treated equally, with the local media left to 'beat the jingoistic drum' for Australia.

Those selected to work for ONS during the games were invited

to take part in a one-day pre-games training day (mostly in Sydney) at which they were given preliminary training in how to write brief sports stories in ONS style. Videos of certain events from the 1996 Atlanta games were played a couple of times (since the hundred metres takes less than 10 seconds to run) and the trainees were then given a quarter-hour to write a story about it.

This training was followed by further exercises delivered by email. I attended a training day in Sydney and received the first two practice writing exercises via email before they 'dried up'. Discussions with students during the Games showed I was not the only one that didn't get many 'mock exercises'. Regardless of the job that had been allocated to the various student journalists, they received the same practice writing exercises.

Naturally, wanting the maximum benefit from donating their time during the Olympics in return for a free uniform, food and free travel around Greater Sydney, and in many cases missing the opportunity to see any events other than a rehearsal for the Opening Ceremony, most students applied to be either ONS reporters or flash quote reporters.

Not many succeeded. Of the various applicants from Bond and QUT and CSU, I noticed only a handful had ONS jobs, and they were mainly as flash quote reporters.

They would not be writing event stories, but rather filling in a pre-prepared template with the words of wisdom or euphoric comments of the victors and the hopefully-dignified words of the vanquished. Hardly a top writing experience, but not one to be sneezed at if the alternative was stuffing pigeon-holes, sitting behind a 'help desk' or answering the 'phone.

I found there were plenty of starters from among the pigeon-hole 'stuffers' at the MPC when one of my flash quote reporters pulled out a couple of days before she was due to start reporting on the last eight days of competition. I ended up with three different journalism students (two from UTS and another from RMIT) who were only too happy to swap their mundane MPC jobs for a chance to report on the sailing on one of the world's most spectacular harbours.

At the sailing, the routine was they arrive about 10 am, talk with the Press Information Specialist (PIS) about the event they would be covering that day, pick up their pre-prepared lunch, head off about 11 for their course in readiness for the start of competition at noon (if there was sufficient wind), watch the usually two races set down for that day, return to the ONS computers at Rushcutters Bay at the end of the racing, and write about six sentences on the day's action in that class.

What Ended Up Happening

On the Help Desk at Rushcutters Bay was a final-year CSU print journalism major who said she would have much preferred to be part of the ONS reporting team.

It appeared that many of the prized volunteer reporting jobs had gone to qualified journalists at the expense of the keen, but obviously less-qualified journalism students. This after the ONS Supervisors had been told by various SOCOG officials that part of the Olympic philosophy was to 'leave something behind' in the Olympic city, by helping to 'train' young people, in this case in sports journalism.

From informal discussions with other ONS Supervisors it was apparent they did their best to rotate the jobs within their group, but there were still many unhappy journalists-of-the-future who spent the entire Olympic Games either answering questions at a Help Desk, photocopying, filling pigeon-holes or running simple errands.

Why couldn't the journalism students on the Help Desks, photocopying, filling pigeonholes or running errands be included in a general rotation with the ONS reporting team at their venue? They all had enough training to handle the brief reporting tasks. While this may have happened at some of the smaller venues, it was certainly not commonplace.

While there is some value in just 'being around' the world's best sports writers, watching them work and chatting with them where possible during their 'down times', being afforded the opportunity to write something at their venue, see it appear for all the see (and draw upon) on the ONS system, and compare it with versions of the same story written by more accomplished journalists, was surely what the students would have liked.

Some generous journalists did give of their time to talk about their craft with the 'up-and-comers', but many were too busy.

While it is understandable that ONS would pick the most qualified of the volunteers - including in the case of sailing two qualified journalists and a yachting 'expert' - it was nonetheless unfortunate that the expectations of so many final-year students and recent graduates were dashed.

Some journalism students used their initiative and tried to sneak into some of the big news conferences at the MPC to see the accredited journalists at work, but the 'powers that be' soon put a stop to that.

While for some the Olympics was an experience of a lifetime, others were disappointed that their potential was not realised and they were not afforded the opportunities they thought they would be given when they volunteered and undertook the specialist reporting training.

What did the students think of the experience? Since I was

directly involved in recruiting journalism students from Bond University for the Olympic media volunteer program, I supervised a handful during their Olympic experience.

Here are some random comments from their journals:

'All I know is I would love to do more than hand out results and information before, at half time, and after each game. On one hand the whole thing is such a great opportunity, but at the same time I feel like I am wasting my time. Today I worked from 11am to 6pm and I honestly got nothing worthwhile out of the experience'. - *Wendy*

'It wasn't uncommon for some of the students to be photocopying and pigeon holing all day; grossly inadequate when you consider all are capable and intelligent people. In many circumstances this blunted what promised to be a glittering two-week learning curve.' - *David*

'In all honesty reading the title of 'Tribune Runner' made my heart sink a little'. 'Personally, being part of the Games will be an experience hard to match'. - *Ashley*

'I really enjoy reporting on the games, and I'm actually really warming to sports reporting'. 'In the lead up to the Games, I was always the first to scoff at the Olympic rhetoric and the mindless torch worship. Now with the actual experience of being there behind me, I feel differently'. ... it was one of the greatest experiences of my life'. - *Lauren*

'I mean, in the SOCOG newsletters they sent me and the booklets and things I got they talk about living the dream and doing something truly amazing that will change your life. I'm having fun, that's for sure, but I'm certainly not living any dream.' - *Trevor*

'My only real complaint is that I feel I was, in a way, lead to believe my role as part of the Olympic News Service would include writing or editing stories and reports. After being told to study the ONS style guide ... and taking part in the on-line training, I was disappointed to find I did not need these skills after all. I was disappointed by this, considering I had travelled all that way to Sydney. - *Leisal*

'Everyone mentioned difficulty finding things to do and students with much higher expectations of the whole experience were often given menial tasks with little journalistic involvement'. 'However, regardless of experience in journalism, the vast majority of students were manning pigeon holes and doing menial tasks with little or no utilisation of their journalism skills'. - *Sarah*

'In volunteering for the Olympic Games, many perhaps thought that they might return with some practical experience to add to their resumes. Unfortunately, the depth of relevant practical experience that the Olympic Games could offer was not great'.

A More Successful Story

'The Olympic experience is one that provided the volunteers with the opportunity to learn from people in the industry. The degree to which the volunteers benefited from this opportunity depended greatly on how much they became involved'.

- Emma

QUT students were offered the experience of reporting a mock Army exercise involving a major invasion by a superpower on one of our almost defenceless northern neighbours followed up by the 'real thing' at the Army training area at Shoalwater Bay; playing pseudo media for a pre-CHOGM anti-terrorism exercise (1) (footnote as below- I'll place it in the Endnotes); volunteering to work at a media centre during the Goodwill Games in Brisbane and the Gold Coast in 2001; and to wrap up a busy year, helping out at the media centre for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) scheduled for Brisbane in early October 2001.

The September 11 attacks in New York and Washington saw CHOGM postponed, and later relocated to the nearby Sunshine Coast in early March, 2002, but not before a number of QUT journalism students had been recruited for various tasks in the CHOGM media centre. While a number had volunteered for various 'behind the scenes' jobs that didn't eventuate in October, QUT journalism (along with colleagues at other journalism courses in Brisbane) were denied access for student reporters to the CHOGM media centre to report on the meeting for their legitimate media outlets, in our case, the half-hour news and current affairs program heard on Brisbane ethnic station, 4EB, and the news QUT journalism produces for community station, Briz 31.

QUT has long-standing relationship with the Army in southern Queensland that has led in the past to students reporting on major exercises in Queensland and the Northern Territory. The Army approached QUT journalism staff early in 2001 seeking assistance in the running of the mock *Exercise Vital Prospect 2001* at the Gallipoli Army Barracks at Enoggera in Brisbane in early April.

More than 20 senior journalism students and staff from QUT provided the 'mock media' staff for the exercise simulation. I assumed the role of both Chief of Staff and Program Producer for the nightly TV news bulletins on the 'invasion', while colleague 'General' Phil Castle, ably assisted by Susan Hetherington, supervised the production of a daily four-page tabloid newspaper on the exercise.

To show their appreciation for our efforts during the mock exercise, the Army offered a handful of media accreditations for

the 'real thing', Exercise Tandem Thrust, at Shoalwater Bay in the middle of the year when an American task force stormed ashore in a show of their military might.

While organisation was under way for Vital Prospect, Police Public Relations in Brisbane sought student support for Exercise Noble Act, an anti-terrorism exercise in mid-July to test security services in preparation for the CHOGM meeting in October. Other journalism schools in the South East corner of the state were also approached to be involved in this exercise, with some students from Griffith University taking part.

QUT journalism (and the other journalism schools in the region) was approached late in 2000 by Griffith journalism lecturer Cathy Jenkins to organise volunteers for media centres during the Goodwill Games. In all, about 100 journalism students - roughly a third from QUT, Griffith and the University of Queensland - were subsequently involved in the sports-fest in late August to early September.

Exercise Vital Prospect 2001 was a computer simulation for the 'real thing' at Shoalwater Bay in mid-year. Each of the four production days involved an early-morning briefing by Army public relations on what had happened in the simulation overnight and what to expect later in the day, followed by a briefing of our reporters and camera crews. The Army provided CD's of appropriate stills for the mock newspapers, and a huge library of video material (from Desert Storm in the Middle East and Australian troops' recent engagement in East Timor) to help in the production of the special TV news bulletins.

Army Headquarters for the exercise, located in the foothills at the 'back' of the Enoggera Barracks, held a news conference each morning to brief the mock media on what had been happening and to answer any questions on their activities.

Phil's group produced a newspaper on the various angles each day, and I produced a TV news bulletin by 7pm each night. It started at 10 minutes the first night, but by the final night had expanded to nearly a half-hour.

The students enjoyed the realism of the exercise, and the Army 'enjoyed' being put through the wringer each day and having to respond to the media's 'annoying' attention.

Later in the year, a handful of QUT students, supervised by Susan Hetherington, went to Shoalwater Bay to watch the real 'invasion' (*Exercise Tandem Thrust*) and report as 'real media' for our various production outlets - the newspaper, *Communique*, its internet equivalent *Communique Online*, our radio program on local community station 4EB, and the TV news bulletin QUT

What Actually Happened

produces for Brisbane community station, *Briz31*.

From our first discussions with the Army, it was agreed that because QUT journalism students would be providing a valuable service for the computer simulation exercise, that some would be accredited at 'real media' during the major exercise at Shoalwater Bay.

Exercise Noble Act was a major anti-terrorism training exercise for the various State and Federal security forces that would be responsible for the security of visiting Heads of State during CHOGM in October. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) was contracted to provide the pseudo media component for the exercise, using some of their staff, and students from QUT and Griffith University.

The main act of the exercise was the kidnapping of the wife of one of the visiting Heads of State and some of his staff. The pseudo media were to cover the story, and provide regular TV updates on the fast-breaking story every few hours for about four days. Students operated from the ABC's studios at Toowong in Brisbane. Planning for student involvement in the Goodwill Games began late in 2001 and by the time the athletes arrived I had attended about 170 hours of planning meetings and training sessions. In an operation similar to the Olympic Games, but on a smaller scale, volunteer students from QUT, UQ and Griffith were involved in an interview selection process and several training sessions before the games began.

Unlike the Olympic Games, where students were often given one venue and one job during the games, and often did little more than photocopying and 'pigeon hole stuffing', (Patching, 2000) the Goodwill Games media volunteers often worked at more than one venue and were able to do a range of tasks, including writing stories about events for the internal games news service and interviewing some of the world's top athletes on their performances.

I supervised journalism student volunteers at the Surf Live Saving on the Gold Coast and the swimming and diving at the Chandler Aquatic Centre in Brisbane. Student volunteers were rostered to a range of tasks to ensure their experience was not limited to photocopying and delivering results to the journalists watching the various events.

CHOGM would have rounded off an amazing year of work experience for the 'class of 2001'. Again volunteers were interviewed and assigned various tasks like assisting at the media centre and recording an audio history of the event. About 15 were to help at the main CHOGM press centre. Outside of the main CHOGM media centre, QUT students were also to be involved in reporting the activities of a special Editors Conference organised

by the Commonwealth Press Union.

Once the CHOGM conference was postponed, the main media centre did not open for business, and the CPU conference was cancelled. A few students were involved in recording interviews with some of the participants in the Commonwealth Festival (which went ahead despite the postponement of the 'main game') as part of an aural history project.

With the rugby World Cup coming to Australia in 2003, it is likely that organisers will approach journalism schools across the country looking for student volunteers to undertake many of the menial tasks in the various venue media centres.

Internship or work experience coordinators need to be very sure what their students will be allowed to do at such events. While there is some benefit from being involved in major events, and seeing some of the world's best journalists 'do their thing', it is very disappointing for the students if they have had their expectations built up by, for instance, going through a lengthy training process, only to find they spend most of their time photocopying and filling pigeon holes with results.

Ensure that you know how many of the various positions are available, whether there will be a rotation of jobs, or whether if they start as a 'help desk worker' that's all they will do – answer often inane questions from essentially lazy overseas journalists. It will come down to negotiating with event organisers about the scope of assistance required, and opportunities likely to arise.

If your journalism school has a major publication, like UQ's Independent, or QUT's 4EB and Briz 31 programs, you need to negotiate 'real media' access to the event at the same time as you are discussing how many students might help out 'behind the scenes' in the various media centres. There is a 'quid pro quo' here. Organisers of major events, like the Olympics, Goodwill Games and CHOGM, saved hundreds of thousands of dollars by simply feeding and clothing their volunteers. Many students have been left disappointed from their recent experiences. If journalism schools are to provide cheap labour, then they should also be able to have limited media accreditation to the events. At least they should be given a clearer indication of what will be expected of their volunteers, so the students don't suffer from unrealised expectations.

NOTES:

1. All the countries to our north were given different names, as was Australia, and the 'enemy' for the purposes of the exercise, the United

What Do We Learn From All This

States. As the exercise progressed, the 'enemy' invaded a fictitious country to our north, a part of whose coastline was re-drawn to replicate the area near Shoalwater Bay. That coastline would come into play during the 'real' exercise later in the year. The Australian forces were defending their fictitious 'friendly' neighbour. The first phase of the exercise involved a naval battle (in which the 'good guys' sank a number of the opposition's ships), followed by a second phase involving the bombing raid on our fictitious neighbour and a major landing in which the local forces were to repel the superior advancing forces of the 'enemy'. All the usual aspects of war came into play with the Army having to respond to both military and civilian emergencies. Our nationals had to be evacuated. Civilian medical resources were inadequate, so the Army had to set up field hospitals to cope with both military and civilian casualties. An oil refinery on our fictitious neighbouring island was destroyed. Invading troops had to be repelled. There were reports of some of our troops deserting. There were also the diplomatic angles to be covered. The Army provided local staff, including a local Army Chaplain acting as the religious leader of the invaded country, to role play for interviews with the student reporters.

REFERENCES

- Bartlett, M** (2001), Letter to accreditation applicants, August 23.
- Granato, L, and Bowman, L.**, *Exercise Brass Tacks: QUT journalism students cover a counter-terrorist operation*, JEA Conference, Toowoomba, July 3 - 5, 1988.
- Graham, S.**, Manager, *Olympic Press Services*, letter to author, March 31, 1999.
- Patching, R** (1997) *Too many students, not enough jobs? A comparative study of Australian journalism programs*, MA (Hons) thesis, University of Wollongong.
- Patching, R** (2000), 'Where were you in September', *Journalism Education Association conference*, Mooloolaba, Queensland, December 2-5, 2000.

ROGER PATCHING is the Course Coordinator for Journalism at Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane. He has worked as a journalist for The News, 5DN, and NWS 9 in Adelaide, Australian Associated Press in Sydney, and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in Brisbane. After leaving daily journalism in 1979, he spent 20 years teaching journalism at Charles Sturt University in Bathurst, and a year as Visiting Associate Professor in Journalism at Bond University in the Gold Coast. He is co-author of the broadcast journalism text, Now the News in Detail, now in its third edition. He has taken short courses for the Commonwealth Journalists Association in the Pacific and Asia. His MA (Hons) thesis for Wollongong University was a comparative study of tertiary journalism courses in Australia. Email: r.patching@qut.edu.au
