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Tertiary Journalism Education: Its Value In Cadet Selection At Metropolitan Media

Tertiary study in journalism has been a feature of the education of Australian journalists for decades. Yet the value of what is loosely termed a 'journalism degree' continues to be debated, and many industry representatives remain sceptical of its value. Journalism educators have a number of ways of assessing the level of industry acceptance of journalism education. These include looking at the percentage of students who find employment and the percentage of journalism graduates who fill entry-level positions. This paper addresses the latter category, looking at data on the employment of entry-level journalists at four major institutions over a period of several years.

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Of all the issues raised by journalism education, few can be as pressing as that of the employability of its graduates. Tertiary journalism programs largely pride themselves on their 'practical' value. Evidence, both anecdotal and generated by survey (Alysen & Oakham 1996, Patching 1996), indicates that the majority of students who major in these courses do so for vocational reasons. However, equally well established is the fact that completion of a 'vocational' journalism course will not necessarily lead to employment in a traditional newsroom (Green and McIlwaine 1999, O'Donnell 1999). One reason is that the number of journalism graduates outstrips the capacity of the media industries to absorb them.

**Issues in
generating
data on
cadetships**

The actual number of entry-level journalism jobs on offer in Australia each year has always proved a wild beast to try to corner. In 1997, Canberra Times editor Jack Waterford gave himself plenty of room to move when he told the assembled JEA conference delegates his guess ranged from 50 to 100 (Waterford 1998: 10). Roger Patching came to a more generous assessment when he considered the numbers for 1995, suggesting a maximum of 350 (Patching 1996: 57). Both figures fell well short of the 845 students graduated from Australian tertiary 'journalism' programs in 1995 (Patching: 56), and the numbers of both courses and students has since risen.

Journalism education has traditionally responded to the imbalance in the number of its graduates compared to the number of

entry-level positions in journalism by noting that many students find work within the media but outside the traditional newsrooms (Green & McIlwaine, O'Donnell), a point reiterated by Queensland University of Technology's Stuart Cunningham, who recently said that "many students who go into (tertiary) journalism (courses) do not necessarily believe they will get a mainstream journalism job at the end of it. Nor do they want to." (Richardson 2001: 48)

For anyone trying to determine the success in the marketplace of journalism graduates, the lack of agreement about the number of entry-level jobs is just one of the difficulties. The elasticity of the term 'media' is another. The term 'journalism graduate' can be equally imprecise, given the range of courses on offer. The time frame over which a graduate might find a place in the media industry is another variable. This has left the question of putting a figure on the take up rate of journalism graduates largely a matter of speculation. Julianne Schultz was more specific than most in this area when, in 1987, she surveyed 45 media outlets nationwide regarding their employment practices for that year. Between them, the 45 organisations had hired some 199 cadets of whom just 30, 15 per cent of the total, had studied or were studying journalism or communications (Schultz 1988). In the metropolitan media, at least, there has been considerable change in the 14 years since.

For several years, I have been collecting data on the number of available trainee/cadetship positions and the relevance of a tertiary journalism qualification in the pattern of entry-level hirings at four key Australian media organisations whose products are read or heard in Victoria: the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), the Murdoch-owned Herald and Weekly Times, News Ltd in Sydney and The Age. It should be noted that most graduates of tertiary journalism programs do not start their careers at major metropolitan institutions, but rather go to suburban, regional or other media. However, the major metropolitan organisations remain the most prestigious newsrooms at which to work and are commonly used as the benchmark for gauging the success of journalism programs' success in placing their students. In addition, the four organisations cited here are among a declining number of news organisations that still have formal trainee intakes with an exam as part of the selection process, though that, itself, is changing. The ABC is, additionally, the only broadcaster with a formal selection and training program for journalists – something that should, in itself, give cause for concern.

The lack of research in this area has been noted by Penny O'Donnell of UTS who wrote, in 1999 (p. 134): "We need empirical research that investigates how news editors, executive producers and senior journalists evaluate the economic and social value of journalism

education and how often they express their support for university courses by hiring graduates." The generation of empirical data in this field is not without difficulty, since media organisations themselves have little interest in the figures. Many can give only an approximate figure for the total number of applicants for journalism positions each year. Most keep what data they do have on their unsuccessful applicants for a short time only. Inevitably, the greatest amount of information is available only for those applicants who are successful. This is a regrettable situation for journalism educators, since it would be useful to know the ratios of successful to unsuccessful applicants in various categories. Nonetheless, it is possible to infer, from the figures available, something of the significance of journalism education in the selection of entry-level journalists.

The data for the years 1996-1998 first appeared in the Australian Journalism Review, July 1999. At that time, of the four organisations studied:

- Only the ABC advertised its trainee intake.
- All four used an exam (which included current affairs/general knowledge and writing/English usage components) as part of the selection process, although at the ABC it was applied towards the end of selection and only a small percentage of applicants were invited to sit it.
 - All but News Ltd in Sydney offered entry-level journalism positions at cadet level (even if the nomenclature differed). News Ltd hired first at 'copyperson' level, from which staff could then apply for cadetships. The cadetships (though they sometimes carried the term 'trainee') implied an ongoing staff position after the period of training.
 - Only The Age required that cadets be graduates.

According to their then training managers, none of the four organisations preferred journalism graduates over those from other fields (Alysen 1999: 153). Indeed, those from News Ltd (Sydney) and the ABC were critical of what they felt were deficiencies in many of the graduates they saw. The relative coolness, on the part of all four training managers, towards journalism graduates was in itself telling. Nevertheless, their pattern of hirings favoured candidates with a tertiary journalism qualification. This may reflect no more than the fact that a period of tertiary journalism study made it much easier for those candidates to negotiate the cadet test, with its test of news writing skills. In the case of the ABC, journalism graduates had a further advantage in preparation of the 'show reel' of material that was required to accompany the application.

In the intervening three years there have been significant changes in the selection of entry-level journalists at the four organisations concerned. Specifically:

- News Limited's Sydney office, which covers The Australian, the

Telegraph Mirror and the Sunday Telegraph, has ended the process by which entry-level journalists were hired first as copypeople, from whom cadet journalists were then selected. The new selection system will start from 2002.

- The Age (along with its Sydney stablemate, the Sydney Morning Herald) moved, at the time of its 1999 intake, from taking on cadets to a program of traineeships; the difference is that while a cadetship is seen to imply automatic transition to a graded journalist's position, the traineeship has no such guarantee.

- The Age (and SMH) began to advertise traineeships with the 2001 intake. In the past many newspapers did not advertise their cadet-selection tests, taking the view that the first test of initiative for a would-be reporter was to find out how to become one. It is likely that News Ltd in Sydney will also advertise, once it begins its new cadetship program in 2002.

- Both the ABC and the HWT have introduced a preliminary test for applicants for cadetships, the HWT starting with its 2000 intake and the ABC from the time of its 2001 intake. The preliminary test has had a particularly startling effect on the number of applicants to the ABC. It is likely News Ltd in Sydney will also take this route from the time of its 2002 intake.

Large numbers of people aspire to join the profession and, traditionally, this has been reflected in the numbers applying for entry-level positions. In the years 1996 to 1999, the ABC received between 1800 and 3000 applications in response to its advertisements for cadets. Even those organisations which did not advertise could expect to receive more than 200 applications. Most organisations had mechanisms by which they reduced the number of initial applicants prior to an exam, for example, The Age culled those who were either non-graduates or not in their graduating year. The number of rounds of interviews also varied. In 1998, The Age held three rounds of interviews, with progressively fewer and fewer candidates. More recently one or two rounds of interviews have been the norm.

Several features about the number of entry-level journalism hirings can be observed over the six-year period covering the 1996 to 2001 intakes. First, the number of training positions available at the ABC has been effectively halved. The ABC had no trainee intake in 2000. For 2001 it took on eight trainees – one for each state plus the Northern Territory and one indigenous trainee – a significant fall from the 14 it was training in the mid-1990s. Since the ABC is the only Australian broadcaster with a formal training system, and since its staff often subsequently migrate to the commercial channels, the implications of this extend across Australian broadcast news and current affairs. The number of trainees at The Age has also slipped. Initially the number of trainees for 2001 was set at six and then increased by two when the weekday giveaway Melbourne Express was launched at the start of 2001. By comparison, The Age took on ten cadets in 1999 and nine

the previous year. The operations of the copyperson system at News Limited in Sydney make it difficult to make comparisons with other organisations, but at HWT in Melbourne the number of cadetships has fluctuated, from a high of eight in the 1996 intake to a low of five the following year. In 2001, the HWT took on seven cadets.

At the same time, however, the number of applicants has also fallen. Given the apparent popularity of journalism as a subject choice in tertiary studies, this might seem anomalous. The HWT's Editorial Development Manager, Chris McLeod, believes the drop in the number of initial applicants may be a result of the public signs that the number of mainstream journalism positions is shrinking – for instance the amalgamation of radio newsrooms in Melbourne. It may also be the case that journalism courses themselves act as a first filter on the number of young people considering journalism as a career, where, once, a wider group would have approached the papers directly for a position. Moreover, McLeod feels journalism may have lost some of its perceived glamour to the PR and IT industries (McLeod 2001a: pers. comm.).

The general contraction in the number of trainee/cadetships itself augurs poorly for those journalism graduates wanting to find a position in a traditional metropolitan newsroom and invites the question – how do journalism graduates fare within the selection process? Regrettably, the breakdown of journalism graduates to other applicants is only available for those selected, meaning that we cannot judge to what extent journalism graduates navigate the selection process more or less successfully than other applicants. What we can judge, however, is the degree to which organisations hire those who have studied journalism at tertiary level, regardless of their stated position on the value of journalism studies on an applicant's CV.

As in the earlier findings of this study, industry representatives involved in cadet/trainee selection remained cool about the value of journalism education. According to the Manager, Skills Development for ABC News and Current Affairs, Heather Forbes, the national broadcaster considered tertiary journalism studies as a stand-alone qualification only a "minor advantage for cadetship applicants". However, if "the applicant (had) actively engaged" in such activities as "writing for the student newspaper, or even suburban throwaways, community radio", their chances "improved dramatically".

Someone with a degree in political science, for example, who has done all these things as well might be looked at more favourably than if they just had a journalism degree, because they have a broader education plus a demonstrated interest in journalism. (Forbes 2001b: pers. comm.)

The ABC stressed that, of greatest importance, was a 'candidate's ability to write clearly and concisely with good grammar and spelling'.

Candidates also have to be able to speak clearly and concisely. In the ABC's experience, these skills apparently elude many contemporary undergraduates, including those from journalism courses (Forbes 2001b: pers. comm.).

The HWT's Chris McLeod was more positive, suggesting that "journalism courses are improving, particularly with extra emphasis on placements and internships".

While we question whether an actual journalism course needs to be three years long there is no doubt that graduates are far more advanced than school leavers. We always try to look at a couple of school leavers to see just how well they are placed. Putting them in the same cadetship course as graduates can, however, be intimidating for them and VCE candidates have to be exceptional to get a look in....

As for graduates, the writing and research skills gained in a university course are most important. We don't necessarily place greater emphasis on a journalism major over everything but we will certainly have a good look at someone who has done journalism and still wants to be a journalist. (McLeod 2001b: pers. comm.)

As was noted earlier, the *The Age* recruits only graduates. But, according to Training Editor Colin McKinnon, it does not have any preference for any particular kind of degree.

Therefore we've had, in the past, science degrees, law degrees, general arts degrees, languages, plus journalism. Having said that, if you look at this year's eight trainees – seven of the eight have a journalism degree of some kind. So we don't put any special value on it, but clearly they (journalism graduates) perform better... in the testing process than the generalists. (McKinnon 2001: pers. comm.)

News Ltd. (Sydney) employs the lowest ratio of journalism graduates to others. This is echoed in Editorial Training Manager Sharon Hill's comments on the value of whether the organisation considers a tertiary qualification an advantage in entry-level journalists: "It doesn't. We like our entry-level people to have a degree. But whether it's a journalism degree or a degree in anthropology is of no consequence" (Hill 2001: pers. comm.).

In compiling this data, I have broken down the trainees/cadets chosen by each organisation into four categories: those with no degree, those with an undergraduate major in journalism as part of a single or joint degree, those with an initial degree in any field supplemented by a postgraduate qualification in journalism and those with tertiary qualifications in fields other than journalism. These categories may be insufficiently precise for some analysts, given the differences in journalism courses on offer. For example some courses offer a Journalism major within a Bachelor of Arts. while others offer a 'tagged' BA in Journalism, requiring more intensive study of journalism subjects. In addition, the post-graduate figures are not further broken down into Diploma and Master of Arts, and so on. However, more

precise categorisation is very difficult since the distinctions between various courses are generally not considered relevant by media organisations, even if they fascinate those in tertiary institutions. In some cases, organisations did not differentiate between journalism at undergraduate or postgraduate level.

For its 2001 intake, the ABC selected five (63 per cent) applicants with a BA or joint degree including a Journalism major and three with a degree in another field. In its previous intake, for 1999, the national broadcaster had chosen two applicants who were non-graduates and four (66 per cent) with a journalism qualification at either undergraduate or post-graduate level.

Of the eight trainees chosen by The Age for 2001, five (63 per cent) had an undergraduate journalism qualification, one had a post-graduate journalism qualification and the two had degrees in other fields. Significantly, The Age had a quite different pattern of entry-level hirings the previous year, when only one quarter of its eight trainees had an undergraduate journalism qualification and the remaining six were evenly divided between post-graduate journalism and a degree in another field.

At the HWT, four of the seven cadets (57 per cent) chosen for 2001 had a journalism qualification at undergraduate level. The HWT also took on one non-graduate, one cadet with journalism at post-graduate level and one with a degree in another field. At News Ltd in Sydney, four of the ten entry-level journalists had an undergraduate qualification in Journalism, the same number had a degree in another field and two were non-graduates.

These figures suggest a number of trends within the media organisations under study. First, applicants with a tertiary qualification in journalism, be it undergraduate or post-graduate, generally secure more than half the positions in any intake. The Melbourne tabloid publisher, the Herald and Weekly Times, has been the most consistent employer of journalism graduates over the past three years. This may reflect its close relationship with a particular tertiary journalism program, and it may also reflect the demands of tabloid news rather than the potentially more cerebral offerings from sections of the other three employers considered here. The ABC, which once drew almost its entire entry-level cohort from journalism programs, has shown itself increasingly more likely to look elsewhere. News Ltd in Sydney is also casting its net more widely. As noted earlier, the difference in its employment practices has made it difficult to make direct comparisons with the other organisations here. However, at February 2000, News Ltd in Sydney had 21 cadets, divided between its three titles: The Australian, the Telegraph Mirror and the Sunday Telegraph. Of these, five had no degree, eight had a BA in Communication or Journalism, seven had other Bachelors' degrees and one had a Masters degree in another subject area. Taken with the figures for 2001 (above), this gives

Future trends

News Ltd in Sydney the lowest ratio of journalism graduates to those without such a qualification.

Throughout the period under study, only The Age had a policy of employing only graduates as entry-level journalists. Elsewhere, non-graduates take only a small number of positions.

The gender make up of the entry-level intakes is of special interest, given the well-recorded domination of females over males in the numbers of students in tertiary journalism courses (Alysen & Oakham, Patching). Not unexpectedly, these figures are reflected in the cadet/trainee intakes. Of the 33 cadetships/traineeships offered for 2001 by the organisations under consideration here, nearly three quarters (73 per cent) went to women. The lowest proportion of women to men was at the HWT, which took on four women and three men, while The Age hired seven women and only one man.

At the time of writing, several factors seemed likely to affect the future pattern of hirings at the four organisations under study. First, by 2002, three of the four are likely to be advertising their trainee journalist intake, as compared to just one at the start of this study. Advertising the positions is likely to open the field to more graduates of other disciplines and non-graduates, who might not have sought out a position in years past. Secondly, three of the four organisations are likely to employ a preliminary test to reduce the large number of initial applicants to a manageable number for close evaluation.

Here, the experience of the ABC is instructive. The Corporation is now the only Australian broadcast organisation to induct trainees on a regular basis.

In 1999, the ABC received some 3000 responses to its advertisement for trainee journalists. Since respondents were required to include a videotape with their application, sorting through these applications was clearly a difficult call and one that could be seen as undemocratic.

The ABC did not have a trainee intake in 2000. Prior to the 2001 intake, staff involved in trainee selections held discussions with the British Broadcasting Corporation and adopted some of the features of the trainee selection system that the BBC had developed some three years earlier. In the middle of 2000 the ABC placed advertisements for trainees in the press and on its online site. Respondents had the option of registering by mail or online. Some 90 per cent chose to use the online form, although some mailed it rather than using digital transmission.

Applicants were required to come up with a local radio story, which involved explaining its relevance and providing an outline of the story and who they would interview. They also had to write a 250-word critique of an ABC news bulletin and a 400-word essay on

an obstacle or challenge they had faced and how they had overcome it. The requirement to produce written work, rather than just forward a copy of their show reel, saw the thousands of applicants of previous years drop to just 675 in 2001. Stage 2 of the ABC's 2001 process involved a camera/voice test and stage three an interview, general knowledge test and another writing test. Significantly, the current ABC selection system focused on writing and news judgement, whereas the previous selection system inevitably advantaged candidates with a high standard of presentation and may have encouraged applicants whose interest was in presenting rather than journalism. The ABC's trainee journalist selection process is the most difficult for a candidate to navigate successfully. In 2001, candidates had approximately a 1 per cent chance of being selected, though the odds had risen from less than 0.3 per cent of a chance in 1999.

From the time of the 2000 intake, the HWT introduced a self-administered preliminary test to reduce the number of initial applicants to a more committed cohort for examination. The 2001 test questioned applicants about their media consumption and how well they knew the Australian media in general and the Herald Sun in particular. It also required them to write a hard news story in Herald Sun style. The introduction of the preliminary test was designed both to reduce the number of examinees and also to focus more closely on applicants' media skills. McLeod (2001: pers. comm.) says: "The exam is increasingly a test of general skills and we like to look more at the actual journalism activity undertaken."

Until 2000, the three newspaper offices (two of which are different parts of News Ltd) in the group under study here had chosen not to advertise their trainee or cadet intakes, because, as was discussed above, there was a view that seeking out information about these positions was the first sign of the initiative an applicant would be expected to show as a journalist. The ABC's position was different, largely because it is a federally funded organisation with a responsibility to advertise positions. In 2001, the Fairfax papers (including The Age) joined the ABC in advertising its traineeships. Colin McKinnon (2001: pers. comm.) said The Age "wanted to see that as broad a range of people as possible" applied. "We didn't want it just to be through word of mouth or through the established universities. And I suppose by doing that we got more candidates from interstate, and indeed, abroad, than we'd ever had in the past. So it gave us a different range of people to see."

The data in this study have a number of repercussions for journalism educators. They suggest that while industry acceptance of tertiary journalism remains grudging, applicants with a tertiary

Implications for journalism educators

journalism qualification can expect to secure, on average, at least half the available positions in any cadet/trainee intake. The way in which the available figures are offered suggests that industry bodies draw little distinction between the different types of undergraduate journalism programs and take less notice than might be expected of the value of undergraduate versus postgraduate study in journalism. The data also suggest that journalism educators need to look beyond short-term industry trends before using them as a basis for course planning. For example, anyone looking at the 2000 trainee intake at The Age might have concluded that journalism, as an undergraduate qualification, would become increasingly less valuable in favour of postgraduate journalism studies grafted onto another degree. Within a year, that picture had changed.

As Penny O'Donnell observed two years ago, we need more data on employment patterns, including data from a wider range of organisations, particularly the suburban, regional and rural media, together with details such as patterns in the age of entry-level journalism staff and also data on their additional qualifications and other work they may have done. Anecdotal evidence suggests media organisations pay considerable attention to applicants' 'life experience' when selecting recruits and that this can outweigh their experience in tertiary education. The pattern of hirings that emerges from the changes to traineeship programs now underway will be particularly significant, and I hope to include more organisations in future data collection.

A couple of trends appear clear, however, from the increasing tendency of major metropolitan organisations to advertise their journalism trainee intakes and discourage all but the most serious applicants with the use of time-consuming tests at the time of application. It appears the larger media organisations will cast their net more widely in the future in the search for journalism recruits and that in itself may increase the pressure on tertiary journalism programs. At the same time, applicants for those jobs will need to be more committed than ever in order to prove their interest and suitability for the positions, even before they have a chance to sit a cadet selection exam.

In 1994, Julianne Schultz wrote that "it is now reasonable to assume that tertiary courses in journalism and communications will increasingly become the most common form of pre-professional education for journalists: (1994: 208). In 2001, that appears to be true, if only just.

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