

Outcomes versus incomes: Teaching students  
what they need to get a job

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## **Abstract**

It's an age-old question for university educators: is it our role to provide students with specific skills as well as education? Should learning outcomes be more attuned to what employers want? And which employers? As print and broadcast journalism practitioners, as well as educators, we are involved in research to answer some of these questions. As part of this, we questioned major WA news employers about what they wanted from journalism and broadcasting graduates, both in skills and personal attributes, and what they believed was missing from university journalism courses. We found strong agreement about the importance of 'traditional' journalism skills, such as spelling, grammar and punctuation; enthusiasm and drive to find stories; clarity of writing; ability to learn; passion for news; strong work ethic and understanding of journalistic ethics. In contrast, our research shows employers are less enthusiastic about the value of digital skills. This paper looks at whether the skills they seek are adequately covered by journalism and broadcasting courses at Edith Cowan University by examining what is assessed in students.

## Outcomes Versus Incomes: Teaching Students What They Need to Get a Job

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### Introduction

Journalism students have diverse careers — even if many start and finish their studies with the hope of an industry job. Research conducted over the past 15 years suggests less than half of students will end up working in mainstream media. The Australian Press Council's annual report on the state of the print media in 2007 gave a fairly optimistic figure, estimating “35 per cent of graduates find jobs in mainstream media, 30 per cent in non-mainstream media, and 30 per cent in non-journalism areas” (Hill & Tanner, 2006; see also Alysén, 1999; Green & McIlwaine, 1999; O'Donnell, 1999).

At ECU, there has been limited tracking of journalism graduates to determine their eventual career prospects. Lists are kept of graduates who go on to work within the newspaper industry, for example, however no study has identified the percentage of graduates working with mainstream news employers. Broadcasting has been more successful in tracking employment outcomes of graduates, with an estimated 94 per cent of post-graduate students finding work within the industry.

What the literature and institutional experience suggests is that a portion of journalism students — perhaps as many as a third — will find work within the journalism field. The rest are more likely to end up in non-journalism roles with media groups, work in other forms of communication (such as public relations) or different fields altogether.

**The question for educators, then, is how do we maximise the employment prospects of journalism students within the field while providing a substantial education for the significant proportion who find employment outside the field?**

A collaborative effort between the journalism and broadcasting streams at Edith Cowan University is hoping to address this question. This effort has involved joint discussions of course material, comparison of topics covered and an audit of both the journalism and broadcasting majors. On another front, the authors of this paper are involved in research that seeks to discover what the news industry says it wants from graduates and whether the skills and attributes nominated by industry are adequately encompassed in the course material.

This paper seeks to document one slice of this effort: a comparison of the skills and attributes the news industry says it wants in graduates with those actively assessed within the streams. By examining exactly what is being assessed, we hope to be able to identify areas where students may need to demonstrate additional learning if they are to perform to the standards that would put them into consideration for a job within the news industry.

**What do News Employers want in our Graduates?**

*“He or she should present well, be confident and approachable, bright and keen to learn, and listen to advice. I would also love to have someone who was keen to take some risks, but be aware of the consequences of hers or his actions should they overstep the mark. I believe an honest and ethical person makes the perfect fit for journalism; i.e., someone interested in the truth of the matter.” (Major Australian newspaper)*

*“I guess we’re looking for multitasking saints, prepared to work diligently in a broad range of areas and be willing to turn their hands to a range of tasks to produce a range of content both for online use and in-paper.” (PerthNow)*

Employers don’t want much — just multi-skilled, ethical, honest, diligent ‘multitasking saints’. That is the clear result of our surveys of WA’s major news employers. We contacted 10 major employers and asked them to take an online survey rating 45 individual skills, characteristics and attributes, ranging from the ability to navigate online using a search engine to curiosity to experience in a university newsroom. We also asked them to design their perfect journalism or broadcasting graduate. Detailed results of that research are being published elsewhere, but in brief, the research questions we considered were:

Research Question One: What skills do news employers say are important to them when hiring university graduates or new journalists?

Research Question Two: What skills and attributes do news employers say they would want if they could design the perfect journalism or broadcasting graduate?

Research Question Three: What skills or attributes do news employers say they are not seeing in graduates that they believe should be addressed in journalism and broadcasting programs?

One major finding was that despite the rapid increase in the use of new technology in newsrooms, digital skills were not highly prized by WA’s major news employers. In fact, traditional skills dominated the skills and attributes considered to be essential or very important with news employers in almost unanimous agreement among the 10 respondents about the importance of the 12 skills listed in Table One. As can be seen, these skills were held to be essential or very important by almost all employers. Only one digital skill was widely held to be this important — the ability to navigate online using such things as search engines.

Skill/characteristic	Essential	Very important	Median
Ability to learn	8	1	5.00
Good spelling, grammar and punctuation	7	3	5.00
Enthusiasm/drive to find stories	7	3	5.00
Clarity of writing	7	2	5.00
Passion for reading, hearing and watching news	7	2	5.00
Strong work ethic	7	2	5.00
Understanding of journalistic ethics	7	1	5.00
Objectivity	6	3	5.00
Curiosity	6	3	5.00
A passion for words and writing	4	5	4.00
Strong general knowledge	4	5	4.00
Ability to navigate online	4	5	4.00

Table 1: Skills or attributes rated most highly by news employers

Are we Teaching these Skills?

Knowing what news employers want is part of the equation, but another part is answering the question, ‘are we teaching these skills?’ We considered several approaches to answering this question, including examination of course material and overall unit outcomes. We settled on an audit of the formal assessments set in compulsory units within the broadcasting and journalism majors to establish whether we were assessing students for these key skills and attributes.

Methodology

Our first step was to note each assessment, the weighting given to it, any stated graduate or unit outcomes and the marking criteria (if stated) that was applied. The next step was to summarise the assessments and sort marking criteria into categories such as news values; personal presentation; research; and critical thinking. As an example, in BRO2025, students produce a radio show worth 40 per cent of their grade. The unit outcomes are that they are able to plan and research material for broadcast; demonstrate basic interviewing, ad-libbing, observation/description and vocal techniques; and record and edit digital audio materials. Students are judged on how well the show matched their nominated station format (news values); presentation skills (personal presentation); content (news values); interviewing (interviewing) and technical ability (technical skills).

Critique of this Methodology

There are some issues with judging units based on assessments: firstly, only summative (formal) assessments are considered in this list so in-class exercises are excluded – potentially ignoring some learning taking place outside the assessment structure. Secondly, there is considerable variation between assessments in terms of the level of detail given in

marking criteria. Some assessments list no obvious criteria (this is frequently the case for news quizzes where marks are awarded on the basis of correct answers.) Other assessments have detailed checklists that students are expected to observe. Not all elements on these checklists will be judged equal to each other. Finally, the raw description of a task doesn’t begin to encompass the learning a student must undertake to complete the assessment, and nor does a list of marking criteria. It is likely the learning experience is considerably greater than the sum of these parts.

That said, these formal assessments are the ONLY criteria we have for judging how well a student has passed the compulsory units. It is surely important that we are assessing them on the items that most matter and that anything important is included – and clearly articulated – in our assessment structure.

What we found

There are seven compulsory units within the broadcasting major and students must choose another 15 credit points (one unit) to make up the major. Journalism students take five compulsory units and choose three more for their major. Two units are common to both majors. The assessments in these compulsory units — and those common to both majors — are shown in Table Two.

	Journalism
Write two case studies	Prepare writing assignments
Produce two radio programs	Work in a newsroom
Record an event description	Help produce a weekly online
Write a minor and major essay on	newspaper
political topics	Undergo quizzes based on style and
Undertake a politics test	work production knowledge
Undergo news quizzes	Produce four feature articles
Join in a group presentation on media	Prepare an autobiography and story
coverage	plan
Report on current affairs broadcasts	Cover a breaking news story
Produce a television news package	Cover a mock press conference
Produce a TV current affairs report	Write a comment piece
Write and present a TV news update	
Produce a TV program	
Produce a current affairs package for radio Produce a radio news bulletin Provide a reflective analysis of radio news Debate and write an essay on an issue of journalistic ethics Undertake a law exam	

Table 2: List of Assessments in the Broadcasting and Journalism Majors

Once we broke down the marking criteria for all our assessments, a number of trends emerged. Both units had an emphasis on authentic assessment and there were also a number of skill areas clearly assessed by both courses, including:

*News values:* For broadcasting, this includes assessment of the types of stories chosen for packages; the newsworthiness of stories; choice of pictures and sound, and audience awareness. For journalism students, newsworthiness is a key assessment point in article-writing exercises and is closely associated with ‘accuracy’ as a marking criterion as well as awareness of the publication market and readership. For both groups objectivity is considered important.

*Ethics and law:* Both courses include a key media ethics and law unit as a compulsory unit. Assessment includes demonstration that the student can identify and articulate key legal

and ethical issues within journalism, such as identification of defamation and court reporting issues; the rights of sources; obligations under the Australian Journalism Association Code of Ethics.

*Interviewing skills:* While ‘interviewing’ is a term occurring in marking guides in both broadcasting and journalism units — and is a key skill required to perform within industry — it is interesting to note that it is not developed particularly. The key criteria appear to be demonstration of sound interviewing techniques (as evidenced in print articles) and the interest level of questions and appropriateness of interview grabs when editing (in broadcast recordings).

*Research skills:* ‘Research skills’ were mentioned in marking criteria predominantly for those units that were not journalism practice-based, particularly political or government units. For practice-based units, research was discussed within the framework of whether enough had been done to meet the needs of the story being reported. While there was an expectation students would use computer skills as part of this research, this was rarely spelled out.

*Critical analysis:* There was limited use of the term ‘critical analysis’ as a marking criterion in both units and where it was used, it was applied to a student’s ability to demonstrate analytical skills in relation to what they could read, see or hear in the media. Other critical thinking skills such as ‘argumentation’ and ‘independent thinking’ were used for some assessments, which are perhaps similar in result if not terminology. There were also areas more clearly assessed in one course than in the other.

*News literacy:* Although journalism students are expected to read widely as part of their studies, it appears there are few formal assessment points to confirm that they are, in fact, doing this. Broadcasting students are assessed on awareness and understanding of current affairs, however, through the use of news quizzes.

*Writing skills:* Unsurprisingly, writing skills — and the specific skills of spelling, grammar, punctuation and expression, lead sentence writing, article structure and appropriate use of style are key assessment issues for journalism students, used in the marking criteria in nearly all assessments. Broadcasting students are also assessed on script writing, report writing and essay production, but there is less overt emphasis on these abilities.

*Personal presentation:* Broadcasting is unique in assessing how well the student ‘presents’, through a portfolio; ability to demonstrate confidence, authority, energy and intelligence; use of voice; and being engaging and friendly on camera or on air. No equivalent requirement was set for journalism students.

*Technical and production skills:* These also were much more emphasized by broadcasting assessments, and include marking based on the students’ technical skills in recording and editing sound and vision; the mix of elements in the final package and inclusion of necessary elements (such as appropriate introductions, good transitions between material, wrap-ups etc).

*Group work skills:* A number of assessments in both courses are group assessments, however the marking guides show a difference in what constitutes ‘good’ group work between the courses. In broadcasting, for example, the marking guides are clear that teamwork, shared responsibility and communication are key issues. In the few group projects set for journalism, however, individual performance is still a key issue, with indications of good performance including working to deadline; demonstration of leadership; documentation of individual performance; organisation; evidence of reflection on the student’s work and evidence of reflection on corrections made to the student’s work (with the hope, obviously, of spurring improvement.) These more individualistic assessment points could arguably been seen as assessing work ethic as much as group work.

Discussion

As would be expected personal presentation and technical skill play a greater role in the formal assessment process within broadcasting than in the more print-focused journalism stream. Conversely, writing plays a dominant role in journalism marking criteria, followed by research. Demonstration of news values is a major factor in both streams. Group work receives a heavier emphasis in broadcasting, probably due to the technical complexity of many tasks. Group work is assessed within journalism, but it fits better under the more generic term of work ethic, with a focus on documented leadership, organisation and reflection on work practices rather than teamwork for a productive end.

So if we compare these lists to the original research showing the skills and attributes rated most highly by news employers, how well do our assessments test student skills in these areas? As Table Three demonstrates, in both journalism and broadcasting basic writing skills are assessed throughout the course. Students also get assessed on their ability to demonstrate ethics, objectivity and, to a lesser extent, general knowledge. Work ethic is problematic, but both courses test elements that might help comprise work ethic, including making deadlines, punctuality, leadership and group work. The same applies to ability to learn. However, we don't specifically assess enthusiasm, passion, drive and curiosity. Clearly, there are areas where work can be done and as part of consideration of how we teach these courses, we are looking at methods of assessing these attributes.

	Assessed or not?
Ability to learn	Greater assessment required
Good spelling, grammar and punctuation	Assessed
Enthusiasm/drive to find stories	Not assessed
Clarity of writing	Assessed
Passion for reading, hearing and watching news	Not assessed
Strong work ethic	Greater assessment required
Understanding of journalistic ethics	Assessed
Objectivity	Assessed
Curiosity	Not assessed
A passion for words and writing	Not assessed
Strong general knowledge	Assessed
Ability to navigate online	Greater assessment required

Table 3: Assessment of the skills attributes rated most highly by news employers

Conclusion

Our online survey shows employers say they have a definite preference for traditional journalism skills and don't see digital skills as something students need to learn as part of their course. But there is also a strong emphasis on skills such as passion, drive, energy and curiosity, which may be more difficult to teach. Looking at the broadcasting and journalism assessments at Edith Cowan University and comparing them with what employers say they want in entry-level journalists, provides some food for thought. For example, employers want students with 'strong general knowledge'. This is an area where educators can play a role, by looking at increasing the assessment value of news quizzes. The desire for graduates with a strong work ethic is more challenging for educators, but it can at least be nurtured by providing students with assessments that require individual thought and effort, leading to a sense of pride in the finished product (e.g. producing a TV or radio program, or running a student newspaper). It becomes more difficult when we try to produce graduates with sought-after attributes like enthusiasm and drive to find stories and curiosity. Is it possible to 'teach' these

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characteristics? Perhaps it is up to educators to make the subject so exciting, so desirable, that students can't resist.

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