

Selling the Dream: Are We Offering
Employability or Making a ‘Vocational Offer’?

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Abstract

There are more than 20 journalism programs around Australia competing for students interested in studying the profession and learning its practices. While research suggests just a third of these students will end up working in the industry, studies also show many students are unhappy if they miss out on a journalistic job, believing it a natural progression from their undergraduate studies into journalism employment. This paper investigates the online information provided to potential journalism students at different Australian universities and private colleges and contrasts them with the message provided to students at Edith Cowan University. It finds that while some online handbooks effectively make a ‘vocational offer’, linking study with a career in the field, ECU does not. It argues increased candour is not, in fact, a disadvantage and could allow ECU to diversify its appeal to students beyond a small core of would-be journalists.

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Introduction

The issue of the employability of journalism graduates is something that has prompted considerable debate among educators in the field, with research repeatedly finding that fewer than half of students will end up working in a mainstream media publication. A recent Australian Press Council report on the state of the print media in Australia estimated "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, pp. 468-469). Similar figures were found in a University of Queensland study (Green & McIlwaine, 1999). Overseas, the figures appear slightly worse, with a sharp decline in recent years in employment of journalism graduates. In 1987, 40 per cent of US bachelor-degree recipients with news-editorial emphasis gained jobs with newspapers or wire services. In 1997 it was 35 per cent. By 2008 — albeit a bad year for journalism with significant cuts to news organisations — it had fallen to 23 per cent (Becker, Vlad, Olin, Hanisak, & Wilcox, 2009, pp. 64-65). What these figures suggest is that while journalism might in the title of the course, it is far from an assured career path for many students.

This is not necessarily a problem, however, and students entering journalism courses are not being groomed exclusively for one profession. Some students enter journalism courses not because they want to become journalists, but because they want journalistic skills, and researchers have found these can be prized by employers, such as those in public relations and advertising (O'Donnell, 1999, pp. 135-136). Indeed, research conducted at the University of Technology Sydney found journalism graduates there had a comparatively high employment rate (nine out of ten were employed, though just one in three was working in a newsroom), and earned more on average than other graduates. Importantly, those who were

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employed outside journalism were earning more than those employed in the field (O'Donnell, 1999, p. 131.)

But while an alternative career might be more lucrative, students aren't always impressed. The same UTS study of journalism graduate outcomes found the majority of graduates who were not employed in newsrooms were dissatisfied with their non-journalistic roles, saying they were "not doing what they expected to be doing after finishing a university degree in journalism" (O'Donnell, 1999, p. 131.) The author argues that journalism graduates have strong expectations of a career in journalism, describing what she says is seen as a

... vocational offer made by universities to journalism students. The offer is that journalism graduates should be job-ready for entry-level employment in the media. The implication is that professional education in the university context can equip all those who graduate with the intellectual and technical skills needed to be a journalist. This is clearly debatable. (O'Donnell, 1999, pp. 133-134)

Other studies considering the perspectives of students majoring in journalism find a high proportion of them want to go on to work in the industry. Aysen & Oakham (1996) questioned 130 undergraduate students and found "... 103 said they intended to major in journalism and, of those, 64 said they were planning a career in the profession, while 34 had not made up their minds" (Aysen & Oakham, 1996, p. 41). Of the 103 planning to major in journalism, most had optimistic views of their chances of finding a job in the industry. Some 35 per cent rated their chances as good to very good and another 2 per cent believed their chances were excellent. Only four students thought it would be nearly impossible to secure a job in the industry (Aysen & Oakham, 1996, p. 45). In other words, almost two out of three likely journalism major students wanted to work in the industry and almost four in ten believed their chances of doing so were good to excellent.

A pilot study conducted among final semester journalism students at ECU in 2009 sought to investigate the career intentions of our students and also found journalism employment dominated their aspirations. Asked to nominate the types of jobs they would be looking for after graduation (with the option of providing more than one response), 57 per cent of the 21 students who responded nominated "reporting at a newspaper", 38 per cent nominated another journalism job at a newspaper, 33 per cent said they would look for an online journalism job and 48 per cent said they would look for work reporting news on radio or television. Non-journalistic jobs were much less frequently nominated, with public relations considered by 14 per cent, followed by advertising and marketing, each on 4 per cent. The same study sought responses from a group of journalism graduates who had finished their degree within the previous year. Although the responses to this graduate survey were small (just 12), it found that only three graduates were working full-time in a journalistic role, two were working part-time in journalistic roles and one was working part-time in broadcasting. Several of these respondents said they wished more time had been spent at university advising students on how to enter the industry (Callaghan, 2010).

What educators are left with, then, is the real risk of student disappointment with their degree — even in the event of them gaining successful employment — if it is not in the field of journalism. This leads to a question about how journalism courses are being marketed to students in the first place: are they being promoted as providing a broad education that will build their employability in journalism and its many related fields, or as a path into journalism itself? This paper looks at this question by examining the variation in online information provided to potential journalism students at different Australian universities and

private colleges, and contrasts this with the message provided to students at Edith Cowan University.

As part of this examination, it is necessary to put the use of online course promotion material into context. A number of researchers have looked at what has been described as an increasingly competitive and consumerist shift in higher education (see, for example, Brown, Varley, & Pal, 2009; Maringe, 2006; Moogan & Baron, 2003; Pithers & Holland, 2007), and have discussed the process that students go through in deciding course selection. Maringe, 2006, describes the application of buying behaviour theory to education, which suggests there are definable stages through which students pass when selecting a course. These include pre-search behaviour, in which students passively register the existence of potential institutions, search behaviour, in which they start to investigate a short list of universities, application stage, choice decision and eventual registration (Maringe, 2006, pp. 468-469). The information directly provided to potential students by institutions is important in moving students through this process. Moogan, Baron and Bainbridge (2001) found that prospective students usually had limited knowledge of higher education, and researched the educational market using promotional materials such as prospectuses, guide books and electronic sources of information (Moogan, Baron, & Bainbridge, 2001, p. 180). A more recent study found the internet was the key place where students sought information, particularly as it was more up-to-date than many hardcopy publications, followed by the prospectus (Brown et al., 2009, p. 318).

A number of researchers have warned of the risks of seeing university education as just another commodity that can be considered, researched and purchased. Ricketson (2005) notes "there are costs ... in adopting the consumer model. A university degree is not a toaster. Under the consumer model, if a toaster malfunctions the customer returns it and gets a replacement. Smoke and sparks signal a malfunctioning toaster; how does a malfunctioning education signal itself?" (Ricketson, 2005, p. 3). Baldwin and James (2000) also warn of problems, arguing that where products are

tangible in nature, it is always possible for potential buyers to investigate the inherent qualities of different makes and brands, and often to call on some objective tests to verify claims. ... But one is dealing with intangible, non-observable qualities in higher education: the outcomes of university courses are much harder to assess and compare than, say, the holding properties of different brands of glue. They are complex and long-term, and many are hard to measure precisely. (Baldwin & James, 2000, p. 142)

Unfortunately, many students struggle to make this distinction. Putnis and Axford (2002) identify the prospect of students misinterpreting the handbooks and other material as being a real issue within Australian media studies courses, particularly for first-generation and overseas students. These students were considered vulnerable to misunderstandings about the link between course and employment and the authors warn that there needs to be much clearer articulation between the skills taught and likely employment destinations.

... the principle of 'buyer beware' seems to apply for potential students. Whether the course they enrol in fulfils their expectations will largely depend on how well they can interpret the course handbooks and outlines. Students need to 'read between the lines' and have other sources of information — such as contact with students already in a given course if they are to be able to make an informed choice about the course in which to enrol. (Putnis & Axford, 2002, pp. 16-17)

Findings

The investigation of how Australian journalism courses were promoting themselves to prospective students began with a search of 27 courses at 25 universities and two colleges. Twenty-four of the courses are undergraduate bachelor degrees, while the Graduate Certificate in Journalism, Media and Communications offered by the University of Tasmania and the two diplomas offered by the private colleges were also considered. In each case, the university's online handbook or online course information was examined (with the exception of the University of South Australia, which provided a downloadable PDF rather than an online information source). The material was considered from the perspective of a potential student seeking the answer to two hypothetical questions:

1. Where will this course lead me?
2. Why should I choose this course over another one?

It was found that universities varied widely in their approach taken in promoting their journalism courses, with some making a very strong connection between studying their course and a career in the industry, while others were far more equivocal. The first approach made an extremely strong connection between study and employment in the industry, as does the private college Jscool, which on its homepage sums up what it says are the reasons for studying its course:

In a nutshell ... the best chance of a job in journalism of any course in Australia ... Hey it's a no-brainer! If you really want to be a journalist and do a fun course, get yourself into Jscool! ("Jscool, Journalism Education and Training," 2009).

Swinburne says its course will "ensure you are fully equipped to work as a journalist now — and in the future" ("Swinburne University of Technology, Bachelor of Arts (Journalism)," 2009), while Deakin University and Newcastle University also make a strong connection.

The second approach links the design of the course to employment, by making the link not between studying and eventual employment as a journalist, but between what the course was *designed* to do and such a career. Universities including Charles Sturt University and The University of Technology, Sydney, took this approach with UTS describing its journalism program thus:

The emphasis is on developing journalists who are innovative, reflective and have a strong understanding of the role of journalism and the contexts in which it is practised in Australia and internationally. ("University of Technology Sydney, Journalism," 2009)

The third approach describes the career of journalism without making an explicit link to studies, although students may bridge this semantic gap in their own minds. Griffith University takes this tack. It poses the question, "why choose this program?" then answers by linking the decision to the career.

Journalism is an exciting profession covering a broad range of activities including government and political reporting, business and finance, police, local government, health, science, urban and rural affairs and sport. As a journalist you will have the chance to inform people and question the decisions that affect the community. ("Griffith University, Bachelor of Journalism," 2009)

In each of these examples, the connection is strong enough that it may be construed by a potential student as forming the “vocational offer” described by O’Donnell (1999), and could lead to heightened student expectation of finding a position in the industry. The next level of approach taken by universities is more equivocal about the likelihood of graduates progressing into journalistic roles, but students may still find they have to read between the lines of the promotional material. Murdoch University, for example, says its course “prepares students for the professional practice of high quality journalism ... [and] will give you the practical skills and understanding of industry to work as a journalist.” Immediately after this, however, it adds that “if you combine your course with a degree in Media studies, Public Relations or even Radio, you can expand your skills for more niche roles” (“Murdoch University, Journalism”, 2009). This can be taken to qualify the link to professional practice with a recognition that extra study may be needed, or that alternative career paths are on offer. Similar approaches were taken by the University of Western Sydney, La Trobe University and The University of Sydney.

Some of the most candid course outlines, including those from the University of South Australia and RMIT, recognise in their descriptions that studying journalism will not automatically lead to a career in the field and using a variety of methods to try to convey this to students. The University of South Australia, which offers the only program of its kind in that state, says:

Most of those entering Australian journalism are university graduates, and in South Australia most are graduates of the UniSA program. While success as a student does not guarantee success as a working journalist, it greatly improves individual career prospects. (*UniSA, Experience. Communication and Media*, 2009)

Interestingly, the more clear the statement about alternate career paths for journalism students, the more universities tended to refer to the transferability of and general employability of skills gained in the courses. This was the case in universities including the University of Southern Queensland, which noted “Journalism skills are also valued in public relations, publishing, law, commerce and business” (“University of Southern Queensland, Journalism Major,” 2009), as well as in outlines for several other institutions.

The final approach distances the studies from career prospects altogether. This is the approach used by ECU, which simply describes its course thus:

In a world awash with spin, the practice of high quality journalism has never been more important. This journalism major covers writing and research skills, working in audio, video and online environments, and the legal and ethical frameworks of the profession (“ECU, Bachelor of Communications Major in Journalism,” 2009)

Discussion

In terms of positioning ECU’s journalism program in the competitive field, the message we send to potential students is not particularly persuasive. It does not provide a point of difference with other Australian or West Australian programs, nor does it provide clear information to students about what they will gain in studying the course, such as an increase in their industry employment chances, communication skills, a broadened understanding of journalism, a chance to develop professional or reflective practice, or an increase in their overall employability. It is my argument that although the present message does not inappropriately promote a potential student’s chances of working in the industry, this doesn’t constitute candour by default. The lack of concrete detail about why this course

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is worth taking (coupled with the general statement about the industry) may still leave students construing this limited information as a vocational offer. While it is possible to argue that students receive more information on enrolment about their employability and likely career prospects that might help them adjust their expectations, it hardly seems fair to tempt them to sign up for something only to disappoint them once we have them on the books.

How then, should we be positioning our journalism program to these students — as a stepping stone into a career, as do some of our Eastern States' competitors, by describing the link between study and career in vague terms only, or with a 'buyer beware' disclaimer about the likelihood of journalistic employment? I suspect that the best option for promoting the strength of our journalism course lies in more disclosure rather than less. This initial information, which students use to help frame their thinking about potential careers and their overall employability, should stress not only our increasing success in helping students enter journalism as a career, but also the diversity of the other careers our graduates undertake. An examination of the core skills and outcomes of units can be discussed, linking them to the potential usefulness and saleability in the job market. The clearest point of difference with competing schools should be the willingness of ECU to be up-front about the diversity of its graduates and their employability in a range of industries. This candid approach recognises and promotes the view that while teaching 'journalism' remains a core part of our curriculum, we are also helping foster in students critical thinking skills, an international outlook, an ethical perspective and excellent communicative skills that have a far broader application in the workforce.

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