2015

# A Capstone Unit for Tertiary Journalism Programmes That Aims to Facilitate the Demonstration of Graduate Capabilities

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## Recommended Citation

Cullen, T. A. (2015). A Capstone Unit for Tertiary Journalism Programmes That Aims to Facilitate the Demonstration of Graduate Capabilities. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/1326365X15604939

A Capstone Unit for Tertiary Journalism Programmes That Aims to Facilitate the Demonstration of Graduate Capabilities  by Trevor Cullen

## Abstract

There is still a lack of agreement about what skills journalism graduates need for employment in the industry and how these can be demonstrated and assured. The variability in courses has contributed to significant differences in standards and difficulties in measuring graduate capabilities. In response to this situation, this article outlines the case for the development of a new journalism capstone unit for journalism educators that demonstrates graduate capabilities more accurately and consistently. This final-year capstone unit aims to provide, for the first time, a series of agreed criteria and standards to guide journalism educators in the design and implementation of a unit that effectively demonstrates and measures the required graduate capabilities. While no one is proposing a unified tertiary journalism curriculum, there must be a way to identify the minimum standards and test capabilities to be met by a graduate from a bachelor-level degree or enrolled in a major in the field of journalism. There is much to be gained from collaboration to develop consistent assessment criteria and standards.

## Keywords

## Introduction: The Evidence

In 2010, I co-authored an article in the *Australian Journalism Review* that examined online descriptions of 29 undergraduate journalism courses offered in Australia. My analysis found that more than two-thirds of universities clearly linked journalism study with a career as a journalist in their promotional material, as if the course was a ticket to employment (Cullen & Callaghan, 2010, p. 126). An analysis of the same promotional material in 2012 revealed that little had changed (Cullen, 2012).

A closer look at journalism programmes in Australia reveals a wide degree of discrepancy in content and the measurement of graduate capabilities. I discovered this when undertaking an audit of all undergraduate journalism degrees and majors in Australian universities, which was part of an Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT) 2011 Innovation and Development Grant into graduate qualities and journalism curriculum renewal. The study revealed not only a wide diversity of units on offer (17 in all) but also differences in content, emphasis and delivery. Some courses were more focused on theory-based units, while others opted for mainly practical skill-building units (Cullen, 2014). Currently, it is difficult for news editors to measure a skill set from a graduate's journalism degree or major, and for graduates to demonstrate evidence that they have acquired skills and competencies for employment.

Yet, in a tertiary journalism curriculum, there should be a way to identify the minimum standards and test capabilities to be met by a graduate from a bachelor level degree or enrolled in a major in the field of journalism. This was partially attempted in 2011 with a Special Initiative OLT Grant entitled 'Discipline Network: Journalism, Media and Communication'. One aim was to develop systemic discipline standards for undergraduate and postgraduate courses in Australia that encompassed journalism, public relations, media and communication studies, thereby providing some form of benchmarking across the universities in Australia. While this was an important aim, the outcome was difficult to achieve because of the immense variety of views from educators across the three disciplines, and there were no disciplinary guidelines to measure standards. Besides, teaching–learning outcomes (TLOs) provide a guide but do not define the content, teaching and learning approaches used to achieve outcomes (Romano, 2014).  This lack of specificity is supported by the findings of another OLT project on graduate outcomes. 'While many such lists are now available as external reference points for developing statements of outcomes, regardless of the "outcomes" included on the list, evidence of the standard of their achievement requires assessment of student (or graduate) abilities' (Barrie, Hughes, Crisp & Bennison, 2014).

An article in *Higher Education Research and Development* argues that 'there is a clear need for the capstone experience to be tailored suitably to student (and workplace) needs' (Thomas, Wong & Li, 2014). This point is reiterated by an OLT National Senior Teaching Fellow, Professor Nicolette Lee, who notes that while the capstone curriculum has become increasingly important in Australia to assess discipline standards and Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) levels, the capstone curriculum is extraordinarily diverse and 'must

meet an array of student, institutional and sector needs, including threshold standards' (Lee, 2013). However, there is agreement that, if effectively designed, capstone units can improve students' learning and experience and enhance graduate employability.

This research project builds on these important contributions, but has a more focused, practical and achievable aim—to try and deliver a series of agreed criteria, strategies and standards to guide journalism educators in the design and implementation of a final-year journalism capstone unit that measures graduate capabilities more effectively.

Evidence to support the design and inclusion of a new journalism capstone unit is also evident from further findings from the 2011 OLT Innovation and Development Grant that included interviews (conducted in 2012 and 2013) with 50 tertiary journalism educators and 50 news editors across Australia. There was a broad agreement among the educators that journalism education should aim to achieve three key outcomes: build a broad knowledge base, develop research and analytical skills, and teach core media and communication skills. However, in terms of the last outcome, there was a common view that Professional Industry Placements (PIPs) were problematic for testing graduate capabilities as not only were they decreasing in number, but students enrolled in PIPs did not necessarily have the required skills and often ended up performing menial tasks in the newsroom.

Interviews with 50 news editors revealed that most of them perceived graduate students enrolled in PIPs as being generally competent with digital media, but often lacking in basic general knowledge, and essential news-writing and grammar skills (Cullen, 2014; Tanner, Green, Cullen & O'Donnell, 2014). In fact, PIPs often exposed a graduate's lack of ability rather than improving it. Besides, editors and journalists are often far too busy to instruct, monitor or assess their work practice skills. Industry placements are useful, but they do not provide an adequate measurement of graduate capabilities. Billet (2011) in his investigation into 'Curriculum and pedagogic bases for effectively integrating practice-based experiences' stresses the need to be clear about what needs to be learnt and to consider options other than supervised placements to secure intended educational purposes (Billett, 2011, p. 20).

In short, I think there are four main reasons for the development of a journalism capstone unit:
> • Journalism and the media industry have undergone major structural changes due to the introduction of new digital technologies. This rapid, fast-paced change is notable in many industries but is acute in the media sector and therefore demands a particularly responsive and adaptable curriculum for journalism education.
> • The interviewees—both industry and academic in the 2011 OLT project on graduate capabilities—agreed that there was a key role for universities to provide an educational background and skill-based training for people contemplating a career in journalism and early-career journalists.
> • The study found that there was a wide range of offerings available, with considerable differences in structure even between dedicated Bachelor of Journalism degrees, or similarly named programmes. Currently, there are several final-year journalism capstone units in use in Australian universities but they differ widely in the way they measure and assess graduate capabilities.
> • Industry does not appear to have much insight into the structure of the programmes on offer, even within their home states. This is one reason why accreditation of journalism programmes in Australia is problematic. Yet, there was agreement that industry and universities need to work more closely, with a belief that industry could have broader input into programme design and curriculum revitalization.

These four points appear in a report that I co-authored and which was published by OLT in 2014 (http://www.olt.gov.au/resource-graduate-qualities-and-journalismcurriculum- renewal-balancing- tertiary-expectations-and-in). They are based on the data from the recorded interviews with 50 journalism educators and 50 news editors from around Australia, and they expose real concerns about the need to test and improve graduate learning outcomes and capabilities.

Before these interviews, the 2012 Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia (JERAA) conference in Melbourne debated on how to achieve improved learning outcomes in journalism programmes in Australia against agreed upon national standards, especially the requirement to map and evidence the relationships between generic attributes and disciplinary capabilities. This debate has faded due to an

overemphasis on theoretical frameworks, a lack of agreement on definitions and the sense that there are limited practical outcomes. The topic was barely discussed at the 2014 JERAA conference in Sydney.

## Journalism Capstone Units in Australia

A more recent development in journalism education has been the use of journalism capstone units at several universities in Australia. Universities increasingly offer capstone subjects as part of curricula to prepare final-year undergraduates for employment and bridge the gap between academic learning and professional work. However, the current journalism capstone units all vary in content, delivery and learning outcomes. Some opt for research projects, while others offer professional placements or a selection from a list of core units. Hence, it is difficult to define exactly what a journalism capstone unit is from what is currently on offer.

For example, at the Swinburne University, the final-year journalism capstone unit is divided into two sections: Capstone A - JOU 30002 and Capstone B - JOU 30003. The description of learning outcomes for Capstone A, which involves a journalism project and reflective essay, states that the students will gain experience, complete a journalism project and reflect on ethical and legal issues connected with the practice of journalism. The description of learning outcomes for Capstone B is similar, and the learning outcomes include the ability to identify audiences, gain experience in building audiences, become part of an Internet-based platform and be able to reflect on journalism practice and the ethical, legal and practical problems encountered. There is an absence of phrases, such as, 'measure' or 'demonstrate' capabilities. 'Should' is preferred to 'can'. It is a similar story at the Monash University. The final-year journalism unit is in fact a PIP unit where entry depends on negotiation with the unit coordinator. Learning outcomes are expressed with phrases like 'students should be able to'. The journalism capstone unit at the University of Canberra is basically a PIP but it is the only university to state in the learning outcomes that students 'will be able to demonstrate ability'. This offers concrete learning outcomes while the more optimistic modal verb 'should' creates an impression that it is more aspirational than actual.

While these journalism capstones vary in their preference for either a research project or PIPs, there is still the basic issue of how to measure graduate capabilities. As stated before, PIPs are problematic as there is the presumption that graduates have actually acquired a certain level of capability. They could form part of a journalism capstone unit but only as one of a number of other measurement activities. An initial list of core skills that a journalism capstone unit needs to measure (judging from the existing journalism capstones) includes research, writing, grammar, digital and social media, video, communication and team skills. Yet, there is an inconsistency regarding the inclusion, importance and assessment of these skills.

The structure and content of the redesigned journalism capstone unit (that will be offered to all journalism programme directors in Australia) will draw on the structure and content of the existing capstones and also the findings from the 2013 OLT Fellowships on 'Capstone curriculum across disciplines', the 2009 OLT Fellowship on 'Improving graduate employability by implementing subject benchmarks research' and the 2013 OLT study on 'Capstone courses in undergraduate business degrees: A good practical guide'.

Previous research on the use of rubrics to assess and measure communication skills and capabilities will be used to design one specifically for journalism educators in Australia to use in the new capstone unit. The rubric provides detailed explanations of an assignment for students and allows educators to assess graduate work with quick and insightful feedback (http://edtechteacher.org/assessment, accessed on 25 March 2015).

The new capstone unit will not involve the design of a standardized unit, but instead it will aim to offer a series of criteria, strategies and standards to guide journalism educators in the design of a journalism capstone unit. To achieve this, there will be a wide consultation and the circulation of an interim discussion paper for consideration by key stakeholders, together with a Q and A discussion and review panels at two national and one international conferences on journalism education to evaluate the main features of the proposed capstone, and for the first time, consultation with news editors (who employ journalism graduates) will form an integral part of the development phase.

Encouragingly, 50 news editors who were interviewed for the 2011 OLT project were in agreement that industry and universities need to work more closely, with a belief that industry could have a broader input into programme design and revitalization of the journalism curriculum (Tanner et al., 2014). This idea is reechoed in

a 2014 OLT study on the impact of work integrated learning (WIL): 'Industry and universities should collaborate on curriculum development and design, supervision of students and feedback on assessment' (Ferns, Smith & Russell, 2014, p. 8). This project will, therefore, engage industry (which is often overlooked as an important stakeholder) so they can have input into what the graduate capabilities might be and the standards that are deemed appropriate. This idea builds upon the work undertaken by Holmes and Freeman (2012) that stressed industry needs enhanced collaboration and support from tertiary institutions in order to implement and maintain effective WIL activity and to build WIL capabilities of staff, including supervision. The industry's participation in the discussion and consultation process will have two beneficial impacts: improve the 'distant' relationship between academics and industry (Cullen, Tanner, Green & O'Donnell, 2014), and potentially revitalize the process of industry accreditation for journalism programmes in Australia, which is currently at a standstill.

Finally, the problem of measuring graduate capabilities in journalism education in Australia has been debated for well over a decade. A research paper presented at the first JourNet international conference on Professional Education for the Media in 2004, described journalism education in Australia as fragmented.

> TAFE, private institutions and universities provide an unpredictable mixture of craft skills and professional concepts, ranging from the intensely practical to the abstractions of communication, media and cultural studies. Cadetships range from sources of cheap labour to pedagogical excellence. There is therefore no guarantee that Australian journalists are trained and educated for their role as disseminators of accurate information and informed opinion. For journalism to benefit society, journalism education needs to move towards a more formal agreement between the news industry and the academy on a desirable journalism curriculum (http://portal. unesco.org/ci/en/ev.phpURL_ID=19074&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION= 201.html, accessed on 28 March 2015)

The authors of this paper proposed that all journalism education programmes should be accredited by the industry. This recommendation has not been taken up and it is unlikely to be implemented in the near future. This new capstone unit aims to reinvigorate this debate and seeks to establish accreditation for journalism programmes that embed the journalism capstone unit.

## Conclusion

The proposed new journalism capstone unit draws upon previous research and current concerns and aims to offer a practical and achievable solution by providing, for the first time, a series of agreed criteria and standards to guide teachers in the design and implementation of a final-year journalism capstone unit which effectively demonstrates and measures the required graduate capabilities. It will be offered to more than 30 Australian universities teaching journalism courses. Previous attempts to measure journalism graduate capabilities were linked more to assessment and learning outcomes with an emphasis on acquiring rather than demonstrating capabilities. There has never been a specific national strategy for the promotion of measuring the capabilities of graduate journalism students in the Australian university system. This will benefit both editors and graduates as the latter can demonstrate evidence that they have acquired the necessary skills and competencies for employment. The editors' involvement in the process should refocus much-needed attention on industry accreditation of journalism programmes.

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