

# The journalism industry award, arbitration and the universities

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Australian journalists are continuing their push to become a "real" profession; and they are looking to universities to help them. The journalists' union, the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, is about to take a proposal to the Industry Commission which will disentangle recruitment anomalies. Cadet recruitment will be distinct from graduate recruitment; journalism graduates will go in a year ahead of other graduates. It is uncertain whether this interest in universities stems from a genuine concern to make the "profession" better, or whether it is just "badge engineering".

SOME journalists have had an interest in university education as a foundation for their profession for a long time. Lloyd (1985) records the first such interest in 1860, when the Victorian Review called for the establishment of a university Chair of Journalism, asking why should a journalist's pay be so inferior to that of a doctor or lawyer? It took 60 years or so for anything much to happen, well after the establishment of the Australian Journalists' Association in 1911, and even then it wasn't much; nothing that would provide salaries comparable with doctors or lawyers. The universities of Sydney, Melbourne, Western Australia and Queensland dallied with journalism courses in the early part of this century. Western Australia's was

started by Rupert Murdoch's great uncle, Walter, an essayist and academic. Of the four universities only Queensland continued with journalism. There are now more than 14 universities with journalism courses in some form or other. But still, more than 130 years later, there is no formal recognition of them. But perhaps that's about to change.

Journalists are making their move to professional status well after most other occupations. Besides doctors, lawyers, engineers and architects requiring university degrees, the most recent additions to academic foundation are accountants and teachers. Even police see professional improvement through university education. But the most interesting occupation group is the nurses.

Four years ago nurses moved their education and training out of the hospitals and into the universities. At the same time they restructured their award to give themselves pay and conditions to fit a profession.

Journalists moved at about the same time to change their award. They produced a creditable structure which not only gave newsgathering journalists a career, but partly guaranteed consumers some reporters over the age of 30. One of the compelling reasons to argue the case was the fact that journalists were leaving the industry in droves around their 30th birthday (AJA 1989). It was virtually bleeding the industry to death, let alone failing to pay the mortgages of its better employees. Clearly there was some recognition of this on both sides: employers and employees. And so the new award was approved in 1990, providing 10 levels of professional achievement rather than the old four, based on a kind of parity with the blue-collar Metals Industry award.

The parity point was the salary of a "tradesperson": that is, post-apprenticeship in the metals case, and post-cadetship for the journalists. At that time "parity" was expressed in terms of 15 per cent extra for journalists (See Table 1).

The industrial award gave them a bottom line somewhat below nurses, but an open top-end which enabled solid performers

to afford houses in middling suburbs, and the stars to virtually write their own tickets (See Table 1).

**Table 1: Percentage of metal tradesperson**

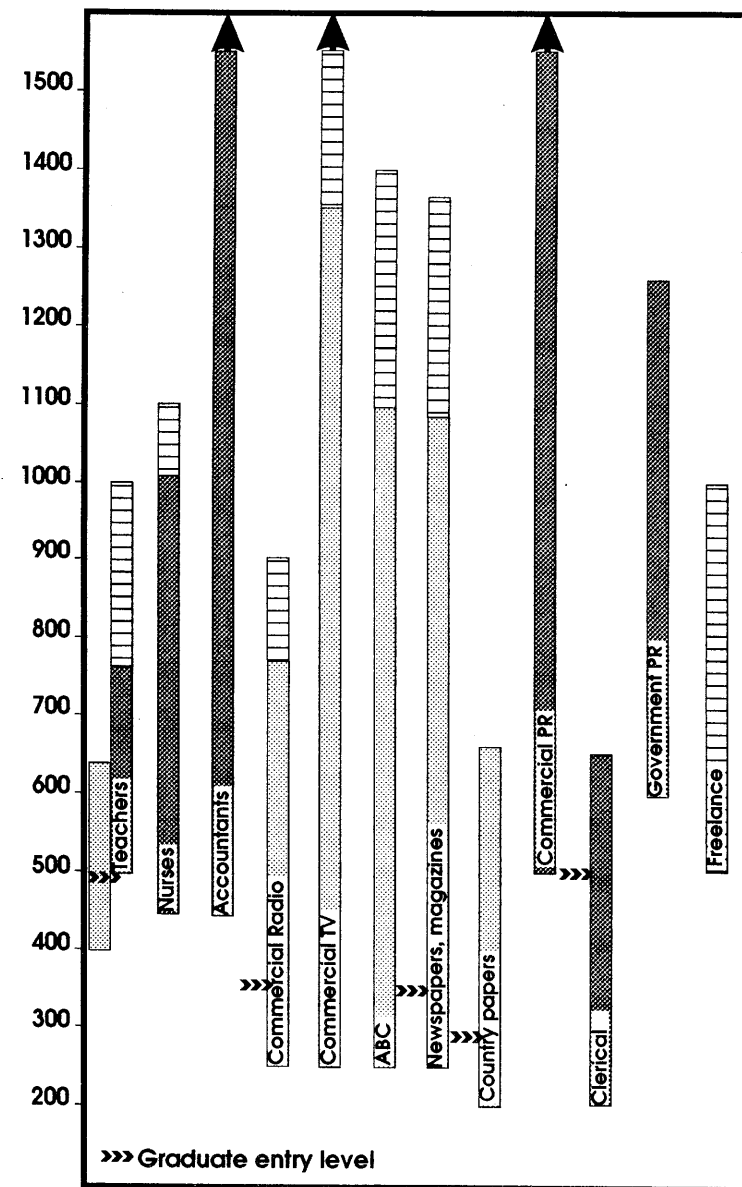
|        |         | MDA Interim | AJA      | ABC      |
|--------|---------|-------------|----------|----------|
| Band 1 | Grade 1 | 100         | 115      | 117      |
|        | Grade 2 | 118         | 125      | 125      |
|        | Grade 3 | 139         | 140      | 140      |
|        | Grade 4 | 150         | 150      | 150      |
| Band 2 | Grade 5 | 160         | 160      | 160      |
|        | Grade 6 | 173         | 173      | 173      |
|        | Grade 7 | 187         | 187      | 187      |
| Band 3 | Grade 8 | 194         | 200      | 200      |
|        | Grade 9 | 200         | 225      | 225      |
|        |         |             | 250      | Contract |
|        |         |             | 275      | Contract |
|        |         | 300         | Contract |          |

But unlike the nurses who had approached their professionalism by linking professional status, university education and industrial award into a tight three-part strategy, the journalists rushed headlong or were pushed into fixing the award and leaving less important matters like education until later.

Well, that's not completely true. They did look at education, but in what some would say is typical of the anti-intellectualism of the craft, the journalists proposed four five-day courses as the basis for promotion and as a guarantee of professionalism. Well, that was part of the guarantee. As the credibility of journalists continued to spiral downwards, close to the bottom of the most despised occupations, four years after their new-found professional status, journalists began to address their ethics. The Brennan committee is now seeking ways of producing potency in that gelding Code and its protective secrecy — that's a separate issue.

The five-day courses were to be commissioned and reviewed

**Figure 1: Weekly salary ranges for occupations.**



by a joint committee called Journalism Education and Training, or JET committee, comprising three representatives each from the union and employers. The current membership of the metropolitan award JET is made up of Alliance branch secretaries Chris Smyth (WA), Louise Connor (Vic) and Chris Perkins (Qld); while the employers representatives are Geoff Hussey (News Ltd, Sydney), Peter Wilson (Fairfax, Sydney) and Chris Watson (Newcastle Herald). The four areas the JET committee decided on were writing, newsgathering, subbing, and law. Subbing and law were set up within a year or so, designed by the University of New South Wales (IPACE) as five-day in-service courses. Little has happened for writing and newsgathering. A one-day ethics course is currently being written by Paul Chadwick in Melbourne. One newspaper executive has been heard to remark "one day's enough for ethics, isn't it, probably more than enough?" Writing and newsgathering are apparently on the backburner for a longish stint. There has been firm interest in law and subbing — see Table 2.

**Table 2: JET course attendances from 1991 to March 1994**

|           | Media law | Sub-editing |
|-----------|-----------|-------------|
| Sydney    | 77        | 113         |
| Melbourne | 85        | 84          |
| Adelaide  | 26        | 19          |
| Brisbane  | 23        | 26          |
| Hobart    | 2         | 3           |
| Canberra  | 9         | 11          |
| Perth     | 25        | 31          |

While training came in as a direct result of the Structural Efficiency Principle under the 1990 award, the introduction of the Training Guarantee Levy in July 1991 helped keep it there. The levy required employers with payrolls of more than \$220,000 to put 1.5 per cent of it into training or pay it in tax. With the levy now in mothballs for two years since the Working Nation White Paper (May 1994) some might say the climate of training it helped create is in danger of disappearing.

The Alliance argues education and training are safe as they are built into the award. Promotion in the first four grades (Band One) is tied to the passing of JET courses. Little matter there aren't four of them. But this has established the principle of promotion on merit, says the union, rather than as before on whim and fancy. This is the reason, it says, that the education and training culture is secure. It's in the award. It can be fought for within the industrial commission. The TGL was aimed broadly at industry training, but tended to have greatest impact on the least-trained workforces; that is, the non-professional occupations and apprenticeships. Arguably little has happened in the area of cadetships since the 1990 award. Certainly the award provided for cadets and J1s to attend university — an important step, giving them four hours off a week — but in terms of activity in the newsroom little has changed. That is, industry participation has done little to step-up its act. The TGL has been generally much wasted, but in some broadcasting newsrooms, it apparently never touched journalism training, going to sales and clerical areas instead. The Alliance made some attempt to promote in-house training when it commissioned respected journalist and educator Julie Duncan to write a cadetship manual. News and Fairfax have bought the copyright and are gradually starting to use it. But this is four years later.

Essentially journalism industry activity has focused on the so-called "professional" area of training — the JET courses in Band One. Some might say the JET courses were making up for the lack of training in cadetships. It might not be altogether uncharitable to suggest they were attempting to build a solid house on rotten foundations.

The JET courses occur where and whenever the occasion demands. Instructors are informally approved. And, it seems, everybody loves them. They're cheap for the employers, easy for the participants (which isn't to say they don't teach anything) and they salve the union's conscience — that it has provided education as the foundation of a new professionalism — much like the nurses.

But it hasn't.

### Don't laugh

I think the nurses would laugh at the suggestion that their professional training could be reduced to 10 days in an upstairs vacant room with a single light bulb. The sub-editing course is sometimes run as a paper and blue pencil affair. Imagine if the universities tried that. I think the nurses would laugh harder if these same upstairs operators wanted to claim credit within the universities. I think the nurses would literally burst, and need attention from their own kind, if these same upstairs out-of-sights wanted to sit in judgment on university courses.

This in-service training is for print only. Little if anything has changed for broadcast journalists, except in the ABC which provides its own. Although courses are uniform, standards of delivery are uneven. The union originally wanted all journalists to receive the same level of training: one profession, one education system, like accountants, psychiatrists, lawyers, doctors . . . . But the employers insisted that regional journalists didn't need the same training as metropolitan journalists. As for provincial and suburbans — they, too, work in a different world.

With the regional, provincial and suburban JETs there's a further anomaly. Most of their recruits are journalism graduates, yet they're required to attend courses which the universities wouldn't include in degrees. That would be interesting for psychiatrists, doctors, lawyers, accountants, teachers, nurses . . . for geography to determine their basic — basic, not postgraduate — training. The reason newspaper employers took that stand, of course, was to maintain different rates of pay and conditions. They have largely succeeded.

Clearly the universities and union are not talking. Yet the union, at any rate, sees its future closely involving universities.

### Education and training policy

If the union intends doing business with universities at some time in the future, the question is on what terms? And a further question is how many universities are prepared to reciprocate?

Some universities have joined into the JET schemes. The University of NSW has already been mentioned. QUT has designed the regional JETs. Deakin is doing a provincial package. Other universities and individuals are involved in delivering the courses. JET is an in-service arrangement, supposedly for journalists who have had little training in subbing, ethics and law: that is, people who haven't done a journalism degree. Well, that's not entirely the case. We'll return to that later.

But there's been little contact recently on the more fundamental issue of pre-service education: the provision of a university foundation for the profession.

After a paper in 1990 which was jointly authored by university and union representatives (Lawe Davies & Smyth 1991), the Federal Council of the Australian Journalists' Association (as it was then) moved towards the establishment of a foundational education and training policy. An important plank in that policy was recognition of the contribution made by journalism courses, by means of the principle now going to arbitration, of journalism graduates being placed a year ahead of general graduates. It is possible this will price journalism graduates out of the market; however, there is no other logical solution. The current situation is ludicrous — where the "skills" training in undergraduate courses doesn't receive any recognition. In some courses this may be justified. However, the lack of recognition is far more likely to stem from suspicion and jealousy by industry and union that universities can't do it. It's industry territory. Universities are poaching their ground.

To survive this line of argument universities must define and confront their competition with precision, and not go on copying American or British models where conditions are utterly different. In Australia the competition for recruitment is coming from

a slowly reviving cadetship system and in-service training which enshrines the principle of a member of any class background being able to enter journalism. Although News Limited has the red-neck reputation for being anti-graduates, despite its push for professionalism the Alliance, too, is adamant that graduation should not be the exclusive means of entry to the industry. However, the union has ensured that all cadets have the right to complete a degree while they're training, preferably in journalism. It is interesting that the News Limited cadetship intake in Sydney this year had the usual 300 applications for eight positions. The usual system of newsroom examinations sorted out the sheep and goats. At the end of the day, though, it was the graduates who won out. They got seven of the eight places; and the eighth had partly completed a degree. The executive who told me this in the same breath stressed that News Limited still preferred the copy-runner system of recruiting into cadetships, "but the graduates know things we can't teach them" he said, "law, economics, finance . . . we can teach them newspapering, we're in the best position to do that".

The other part of the competition for journalism graduates is clearly the general graduate who will be given a "newspaper education" by the papers themselves. However, it was stressed by News Limited that one year of training wasn't enough for graduates. It was considered they needed three years' practical training — but not on cadet pay. They could receive their Band One money while they stayed under the training "umbrella" for three years. That attitude provides journalism courses with their best argument.

It was suggested in the preliminary paper (Lawe Davies & Smyth 1990) that in order to define and confront the competition, journalism graduates should have three areas of strength: a solid general education; a critical education in current media industry and practice; and highly developed skills in reporting. A suggested matrix positioned journalism graduates as equivalent but different from final year cadets, and ahead of other graduates (See Table 3).

**Table 3: Status of possible applicants for J1/J2**

|                | Skills | News sense | Maturity |
|----------------|--------|------------|----------|
| Expert         | 0-1    | 0          | 3        |
| Cadet          | 3      | 3          | 1-2      |
| J. graduate    | 3      | 1-2        | 3        |
| Other graduate | 0      | 0          | 3        |

In order to further cement industry-university cooperation, a preliminary platform of implementation was adopted by the 1992 Federal Council of the AJA which would test the equivalence of final-year cadets and final-year journalism majors. It was based on trial schemes between Curtin University and three metropolitan news rooms in Western Australia from 1990 — two of which are still going. Select final-year students would carry out typical cadet work on a rostered basis. Local union support waxed and waned. Late in 1992 further trials were carried out between the Brisbane newsroom of the ABC and two universities (University of Queensland and QUT). This time the university sector worked closely with the union. In 1993, after consultation with union branch executive and secretariat, and two meetings with ABC staff — all of whom are union members — an acceptable basis was established for letting select students carry out work under the supervision of ABC staff. That same year, the University of Queensland Journalism Department decided to adopt the model as part of its course, to be carried out in all media — radio, television and newspapers. Curtin had made a similar adoptions into its courses at the end of 1991.

It's too early to say there is a cooperative relationship between the union and universities. Although the Brisbane scheme was seen by the union as a national pilot, attitudes are tentative. For example, if a particular chief of staff stifles the initiative of a student, despite the fact that the student is working within the terms of the agreement, the union feels there is little it can do to intervene. It's still seen as a university idea being imposed on industry, rather than something which should be developed jointly. But in many ways, that's the least of the problems. It's

workable. It will pan out in time. In many ways the union has gone about as far as it can go at this stage. The next move lies with the universities getting their act together on a national basis.

This is what brings us to the current industrial matter.

### The industry commission

As this essay goes to press the union is involved in a further jacking-up of the newspaper award. Employers are resisting it and forcing it to arbitration. The plus in all this — and maybe it's too early to get out the party hats and whistles — is the formalising of university degrees as the "most approved" form of training for journalists.

Going back to the Metals Industry parity issue, the Media Alliance is seeking to retain the base rate parity of 115 per cent for J1 journalists. However, it is pressing for general university graduates to be hired at that rate, with or without shorthand, and for journalism graduates (with shorthand presumably) to be hired as J2, or at 125 per cent. This level of pay brings journalists roughly into line with a major white-collar union — the Federated Australian Services Union, whose municipal officers receive 120 per cent of the Metals award as specialist graduates. Of course this long-overdue endorsement of journalism degrees presupposes some kind of educational and vocational standard from university courses which places their graduates ahead of other courses and cadetships. Either that, or some form of accreditation will see graduates from some courses, but not all, classified as journalism graduates under the award. Those who fall short of the yet-to-be-stated criteria of what makes a journalism graduate (See Appendix) will have their graduates employed at the lower level.

### Accreditation

So what? Who cares if some universities get their graduates employed a year ahead of others? Apart from snob value, if it

ever came to that, which would be facile, the importance lies not so much in the level at which some graduates are employed and others not, but the criteria by which they are judged. The danger is that the Media Alliance is actually indifferent to the content of university courses, except in the areas of skills, and probably ethics and law as well. They're the "big three" of professional practice. They're pragmatic, concrete, and employers even agree on them. Every profession has to be ethical after all. Employers wouldn't disagree with that. This approach constitutes the worst kind of pragmatism — worse even than a simple skills approach, largely because it gives an appearance of a critical/reflective approach to skills. Law stands alone as necessary and pragmatic, but ethics studies are largely industry-bound studies which ignore the whole humanities tradition of media studies which asks much bigger questions — of the dimension that universities ought to be involved in (see Henningham 1994).

There are certainly problems with media studies. Their mode of address is almost exclusively directed at media consumers rather than producers. But while this makes it difficult to sell their relevance to the pragmatically inclined journalism undergraduates, the consumer mode of address is potentially their greatest strength. More revision of journalism practice needs to be informed by studies of its audience. The sheer volume of published material in media studies not only renders ethics marginal but demands the inclusion of media studies in any accreditation process. Yet it is one of the more controversial aspects.

But that's running ahead.

Placing journalism graduates as J2 means they must not only be able to cut the mustard against cadets, but they must be as well educated as other graduates, and, most importantly, their industrial skills should be informed by critical analysis of current industry practice. That is, the proper role for universities is not to separate skills and theory, but to produce a new approach to skills (newsmaking) through theory. That can't be done through the odd mass communications course disconnected from the production classes, as is the case in most universities. Most mass

communications courses either ignore or reinforce rather than critically assess current practice. Even ethics courses, for those few places that have them, tend to address current practice in terms of the personal dilemmas faced by individual journalists, rather than looking to the industry determinants which force journalists to behave in certain ways.

Nor is the union's current attitude to courses helping. The current danger in accreditation issues is that the union presupposes it is expert on skills issues, and it will sit in judgment on universities on these, treating them as entirely separate from the academic garbage the universities seem to find interesting, which will be finally accepted not because they agree with it but for the sake of professional status — sort of like the nurses did.

Initially this will have the effect of legitimising the JET courses — the post-cadet training provided by three five-day in-service courses — but there will also be spin-off for the universities. But the spin-off has strings attached. One of those strings is "reciprocal credit arrangements" between JET courses and undergraduate journalism; the other will be some form of accreditation. The Alliance will argue for a privileged position for journalism graduates — but only those from courses of which it approves.

Accreditation is a long way off. Two years ago the universities through their Journalism Education Association negotiated an equal vote on a JET accreditation sub-committee. Nothing has happened since because the universities themselves cannot agree on accreditation criteria. And the union is waiting. (The Appendix is a position paper developed by the University of Queensland's Department of Journalism for consideration by a meeting of journalism educators at Bond University in 1992. The proposal was rejected by the meeting.)

Whether or not the union's interest in universities is more than "badge engineering" or a genuine attempt to really do things any differently, only time will tell.

## References

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- Lawe Davies, C. & C. Smythe (1990), "Education for professional journalists: a career path model", *Australian Journalism Review*, 12: 134-144.
- Lloyd, C. (1985), *Profession: Journalist*, Sydney: Hale and Iremonger.

## Appendix

Presented by the University of Queensland, Journalism Department at a special JEA conference at Bond University in 1992. It was rejected.

### Exit competencies for journalism graduates

#### Definition:

Competency: . . . competence, the quality of being competent; adequacy; due qualification or capacity . . . linguistics, the ability which all native speakers have to produce sentences which they have never heard before. (*Macquarie Dictionary*, 2nd revision, 1981)

The news-media employment arena is being increasingly occupied by Journalism graduates who bring, in addition to yet-to-be-honed skills, professionalism through critical application of those skills and an awareness of the social requirements of a journalist.

Graduates should have achieved competence at least equivalent to a JI journalist. In broad terms, the two may be considered comparable. In some areas (knowledge of the law, ethics, research skills, journalism history, news communication theories, production skills) graduates will have a greater knowledge. In other areas, JI journalists will often have better-honed skills (court reporting, local government, police rounds, finance reporting etc.). However, because of previous exposure to these reporting skills and their broader knowledge of matters relevant to

journalism, graduates will quickly bridge the gap in practical reporting.

Graduates should have a competency in shorthand that would enable them to be graded as journalists within months of graduating. High standards of literacy are required.

In fuller detail, the areas of competency developed by tertiary Journalism course are:

- Introductory reporting and news writing (print and/or broadcast).
  - Principles of subbing and layout.
  - Broadcast production and editing.
  - Advanced reporting (print and/or broadcast).
  - An understanding of what has led to the current forms of news production and presentation.
  - An understanding of the history of journalism.
  - High ethical ideals which embrace responsibility, honesty, accuracy and fairness; and a respect for communities' rules, codes and laws.
  - An understanding of the law as it affects journalists.
  - Regular production of news publications and programs.
  - Advanced research practice for journalism.
  - An understanding of the theories of communication and the media.
  - An understanding of the social significance of the news media.
- The student should be aware that the crucial role of journalism in a democracy is to provide a common ground of knowledge and analysis, a meeting place for national debate; that it is the link between people and institutions.

All of these areas are sufficiently important to require at least the equivalent of separate semester units.

In addition to performing satisfactorily in Journalism studies, the student should have studied a major sequence in at least another academic discipline (viz. Economics, English, Political Science, Engineering) to place him/her clearly in a position of professional superiority in relation to other graduates seeking employment as journalists.

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