

# Tales of the unexpected: skills and attributes successful graduates of a combined journalism course felt had improved their employability

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**In a previous edition of the AJE Journal, Cathy Darby (2012) examined what skills the next generation of professional journalists will need. But not everyone who studies journalism will become a journalist or even want to do so. So what skills do former students who took a course in journalism value about that course in relation to their employability, particularly those in graduate level jobs?**

This small scale study focused on a combined degree course (with journalism as a core component) at a post 1992 university. The aim was to find out what skills and attributes, taught through the course, graduates who had obtained graduate jobs (according to the SOC definition of Elias and Purcell, 2004) felt had enhanced their employability. This is against a background where figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency show that 36% of first degree graduates are in non-professional jobs six months later (see Grove, 2013).

Yet, for the majority of students—and their parents—a degree is regarded as a passport to a better job. This is evidenced through both small-scale studies (Newstead and Hoskins, 1999) and more extensive examinations (Purcellet *al*, 2005), which show that one of the major reasons students choose to go to university is to obtain a higher-status and better paid job. It was hoped that if the author could discover which skills and attributes graduates valued most in terms of employability, more emphasis could be placed on them so that future graduates would become more employable.

## **Background to the course and the university**

The University is a post-1992 institution which, like many others, has taken an active role in the widening participation agenda. According to HESA (2010), 40% of students come from working class homes - at Cambridge it is 12.6%. The Journalism course sits

within the department of Humanities and can be taken as part of a wide range of joint or combined degrees or as a minor. The emphasis is on practical journalism rather than on Journalism Studies and this study did not attempt to engage with the debate, best articulated by Deuze (2005), as to what journalism is in terms of ideology.

## Methodology

Around forty students each year now graduate with Journalism as part of their degree at this institution. Out of these around fifteen to twenty each year are international or EU students. However, this study focuses on home students. This is partly because they form the majority of students and partly because of the difficulty of taking into account a huge variety of labour markets and different cultural expectations for international students in terms of employability. For similar reasons, those who had also taken an MA were excluded as the study was looking at the skills and attributes of the undergraduate degree alone.

This study is qualitative partially because, as Freebody (2003: 35) says:

*To put it bluntly many educational researchers came to feel that research activities structured through the logics of quantification leave out lots of interesting and potentially consequential things about the phenomenon—interesting and consequential, not just in terms of the concerns and understandings of educators, but also in terms of the richness of the accounts of educators' experiences.*

Furthermore, at this university 35% of graduates in the combined areas of Information Studies and Communications (which bundles most of the available Humanities and Media courses together) are in graduate jobs within six months of graduation (Unistats 2012). Given these statistics, it would be very difficult to undertake a quantitative study, as the possible cohort of home graduates across a three year period numbered around eighty of whom around half were likely to be in graduate level jobs.

Graduates were traced on Linked In as access to their data, after graduation, is restricted. This presented a variety of challenges as some graduates who had job titles that fitted the SOC classification were actually in unpaid internships or after initial inquiries, had left to go travelling. In total, 33 graduates were asked if they would consent to be interviewed for the study, of whom 13 initially agreed but with only 11 completing the interview. They were asked to define their job classification. Three defined themselves as journalists. One was a section editor on a B2B magazine, another was a feature writer on a B2B magazine and the third was a deputy editor, also on a B2B magazine. Three worked in PR (one as a press officer, one in a large PR agency and one in internal communications), two saw themselves as social media managers (one was a community manager, the other a digital executive), two were in marketing for large institutions and one was a copywriter for a small business.

The study is qualitative and interpretative: it is “*a collection of cases studied in depth to provide educational actors or decision makers with information that will help them judge the worth and merit of policies*” (Steinhouse, in Bassegy, 1985: 45). This description reflects the aims of my study in that it was hoped to find out what employability skills graduates and tutors feel the undergraduate journalism course is transmitting effectively and how to increase them.

The category of method selected was interpretative case study research using standardised interview technique and following the guidelines set down by Yin (2003: 34) with the proviso that this study has not yet been repeated. The method of analysis was largely contextual according to Ritchie and Spencer's view in Bryman and Burgess (1994) of contextual analysis as looking at the nature of experience and perceptions. While the small scale of the study would necessarily limit its applicability generally, it was hoped it would provide some pointers as to how graduates perceived their degree had—or indeed hadn't—improved their employability.

## Employment or employability?

Graduates were interviewed as about what skills and attributes gained from the degree in general they felt had enhanced their employability and what, if any unique skills or attributes, they had gained from the journalism course that had also improved their employability.

However, this assumes that employability is easily defined—which is not the case. The definition used by my university is that of the Higher Education Academy (2012):

*A set of achievements--skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.*

Pegget *al* (2012:7) also stress:

*It is important that we make a distinction between employment as a graduate outcome that may be measured and used with the information published by universities and the issue of pedagogy for employability which relates to the teaching and learning of a wide range of knowledge, skills and attributes to support continued learning and career development.*

However, the graduates do not share this view. All eleven saw employability as having the right skills to land and continue to work in particular jobs. Nor did they view it in the wider terms of benefit to the community. For instance:

*I know it's hard to get jobs now, but I've been invited for interviews, they [his company] liked the CV and I do feel I have what [the skills] they want to get on from here, so, that's it for me, that's what employability is about (Graduate H, community manager)*

*Employability is about you having the right skills—and the right experience—to get the job you want (Graduate D, B2B journalist)*

*It means having the qualifications and skills that will get you a job and presenting yourself in a way people want to hire you. I've been fortunate in that it worked out for me and I know it can be tough to get a job, but that does depend on what you are willing to apply for and the effort you put into those applications (Graduate M, marketing).*

All three students working in journalism had obtained their job as a result of interning during university at their respective publications, as had one of the graduates who worked in marketing. Three graduates had obtained their jobs through networking and four had replied to job adverts. This is in line with the findings of Blasko *et al* (2003) that a major means of finding employment for graduates was employment networks developed at university (including work experience).

## Skills and attributes gained from the journalism course

The main benefit of the journalism course - cited by nine out of eleven of the graduates - was a growth in confidence. One student also felt that confidence had been a benefit of the degree in general. Interviewing skills were felt to be particularly confidence enhancing, although few had appreciated that at the time.

*My parents feel the degree has been the making of me in that I am so much more confident. And a lot of that was down to the journalism. I found myself interviewing people I would never have imagined myself speaking to. And when you manage it and it goes well that does give you a real boost. My last interviewee was a survivor[of genocide] and we kept in touch until her death last year. (Graduate R, now working in marketing)*

*I deal with a lot of high level people... They are used to dealing with more senior experienced people and that's an extra challenge... but I got confidence [from journalism] because you go out and have to find people to interview and you've never met them before and it's nerve wracking, but you learn to do it, so you know you can do it.(Graduate H, community manager)*

*I wouldn't say I enjoyed the interviewing because I didn't. But now it's something I do every day, interviewing, networking, making contacts. But I know I can do it because it was something I did on the course. (Graduate L, deputy editor, B2B magazine)*

Interestingly, the only student who didn't mention confidence as an attribute gained from the course, was also the only one who enjoyed interviewing, which he put down to being both confident and sociable to start with. Otherwise, the former graduates mentioned that at the time, they had felt that interviewing was challenging, sometimes too much so, but that being forced to interview people unknown to them and from a wide variety of backgrounds and stories had actually given them a confidence in their oral communication which they had lacked before.

This reflects the quantitative findings of the Futuretrack Survey (2013:26) which shows that only 40% of students believe their degree course enhanced spoken communication skills although 90% used these skills extensively in their work. If more extensive research were to replicate my findings, this would be a major selling point for journalism courses because they enhance a skill which a wide variety of employers value a great deal but which most graduates do not believe was sufficiently emphasised by their own degree course.

The use of confidence as a way to enhance effectiveness is increasingly being acknowledged in employability literature. As Pegg *et al* note, "learning and raising confidence, self-esteem and aspirations seem to be more significant in developing graduates than a narrow focus on skills and competences"(2012:9).

## The value of news

Another major attribute students felt they had gained from the course was an in-depth knowledge of current affairs, with all students saying they had read newspapers and magazines regularly during the course—although many had not done so before starting it.

Graduate B, working as a press officer, felt that, "in my work, knowing what a story is

and what is likely to interest journalists is vital. And that is something that, for me, started with the course.”

## Enhanced communication skills

When it came to skills, the main ones cited were enhanced writing ability through learning to write in a wide variety of formats and styles (ten out of eleven) and research skills (seven out of eleven).

*When I go to interview now I always say my main skills are reading, writing and research because that is what I gained. (Graduate M, marketing)*

*I write across a variety of platforms but whatever you are writing you need to be clear and have good grammar and that was something the tutors really emphasised. (Graduate E, digital manager)*

Advanced communication skills are rated as important by employers, both in selecting employees and being important constituents of the job. This is demonstrated in studies ranging from the CBI/NUS *Working Towards Your Future* report (2011), a study of 75 international employers by P+layfoot and Hall (2009) and by Hinchliffe and Jolly (2009), whose report found that employers rated communication skills as second only to personal qualities such as trustworthiness. De Cock and Blaagaard's (2011) study of what skills the journalism employers of MA journalism post-graduates in the UK and Belgium looked for also found that good writing and good communication in general ranked higher than IT skills.

## The main benefits of the degree overall

All the students felt that the main employability benefit of the degree was having the degree, regardless of how many skills or attributes the actual degree conferred.

*At work there are older people doing a similar job and they don't have a degree. But my research skills are much better so I'm off to a faster start. I don't think you could get the job I hold now without a degree even though you could years ago. (Graduate M, marketing)*

*My brother and sister don't have degrees and they are doing fine. But the job I do now advertised for someone with a degree and so you have to have it. (Graduate F, internal communications)*

All of the graduates had either a first, (four graduates), or a 2:1. This tallies with research from the Association of Graduate Recruiters which found a 2:1 is now considered to be an essential requirement for 76% of all graduate jobs according to the Association of Graduate Recruiters (2012). All were in graduate level jobs and all felt generally positive about their degree programme. However, when it came to the actual skills acquired during the degree, students differed widely as to what they felt they had learnt. Six cited time-management and organisational skills as being the most important, three felt that the ability to communicate in a wide variety of ways (e.g., through presentations, essays and articles) had been most beneficial. Two felt that acquiring the ability to learn independently had been most important.

However, none spontaneously cited intellectual attributes such as reflection, analysis, evaluation or critical thinking so after the first two students had failed to mention these attributes, subsequent students were asked about them. Interestingly, when asked if these skills had been developed by the degree and if they used them in their normal working life, eight out of eleven felt that the ability to analyse was important.

*Social media is a new field and so we are always analysing what works and doesn't work, so yes, analysis is very important.* (Graduate E, digital manager)

*I was never very sure what the difference is between all those [evaluation, critical thinking, analysis and reflection] but as the job has grown I spend increasing amounts of time analysing the media so analysis is very important.* (Graduate Z, PR)

*I think that's an academic thing isn't it. My boyfriend got a first and still can't get a job, so I am not sure those skills help.* (Graduate F, internal communications.)

There are a whole host of reasons why students might not have named these areas as important spontaneously. It may be that they regard "skills" as more vocational or practical than ways of thinking. It may be that they were never made aware of the overt link between these intellectual areas and how they are applied in employment or it may be that they are so firmly embedded through the university experience that graduates do not realise consciously that they are using them. This would be the position taken by Schon (1995:60) who regards the working life of the professional as 'knowing-in action' and adds: "knowing in practice tends to be increasingly tacit, spontaneous and automatic thereby conferring upon his clients the benefits of specialisation."

In other words, the graduates are so used to critically assessing and analysing statements, data and evidence that they no longer realise they are doing so. This would certainly reflect the position of the eight graduates who did feel that analysis, in particular, was an important skill but only mentioned it when prompted.

## Single or More?

None of the graduates wished they had taken a different or even single Honours degree, although one or two had originally intended to do so:

*I wanted to do journalism but my parents felt that having English as well as a back up would be a better option.* (Graduate R, marketing)

*I always liked reading newspapers, but then I always loved English so when I saw the course I thought, that's it, that is the one for me.* (Graduate L, B2B journalist)

Graduates believed that work experience should have been intrinsic to the course, not a voluntary add-on.

When asked what might be done to improve the course, nine out of eleven graduates believed that the most important improvement was not the addition of extra or different skills within the course, but that work experience should have been embedded within the course itself, rather than undertaken on a voluntary basis. (The other two believed there should have been more emphasis on social media). All the graduates who had been interviewed had undertaken considerable journalism and/or PR work experience either during

holidays, term time, or both. They contrasted their own success with students who had either been unable to afford to take as much work experience because it was unpaid, or who had been disheartened by repeated rejections. The internal communications specialist, for instance, contrasted her current job with a friend still working in a fast food chain who had not had work experience but who had originally wanted to be a journalist. The community manager contrasted his with that of a friend who had an MA, but had considerably less relevant work experience and was in a lower paid job:

*I had money saved.... so I could afford to take the time and do it (six weeks of unpaid internship), but I know plenty of people who would have lost the job they needed if they had to do that.* (Graduate D, B2B journalist)

Indeed, as Milburn (2012) points out, journalism relies on an army of unpaid work experience students working for long-stints unpaid at junior level in several jobs, something which has made it, according to his report, one of the most socially elite professions in the country. However, the value of unpaid work experience in terms of enhancing long term career prospects is revealed by findings that a graduate who has some period of unpaid work during a degree course increases the likelihood of gaining a graduate job by one and a half times (Futuretrack, 2013 pxxii).

The graduates also felt that having work experience had dissuaded them from intended career paths that might not have worked for them. One decided not to be a journalist after being asked to interview a severely traumatised family while undertaking work experience:

*It made me realise that I didn't have what it takes for news journalism. I love the writing, but that, talking to people who were so upset, it wasn't, it just wasn't for me.* (Graduate B, copywriter)

Another graduate, who had worked for a prestigious magazine with an initial view to working for them or a similar publication, commented that this had been fun but was “not a job for a grown-up”. The benefits of work experience in widening students’ horizons have been noted by Holmes and Nice:

*For every workie who finds that working on a particular magazine would be their dream job, there will be another whose eyes will be opened to working on a magazine or in a sector they will not have contemplated (2012:73).*

As a result of this research, it has been decided to introduce a specific module which includes ten days of work experience, taken in one day chunks. Although placements are likely to be unpaid, the length of time is within the university guidelines for unpaid experience.

## Conclusion

While the value of this survey is clearly limited by its size and its relevance to a particular course, it does reveal some interesting indicators—backed up by statistics from much larger surveys such as the Futuretrack (2013) study of how graduates view the skills learnt from particular types of degrees.

In particular, the finding that interviewing was regarded as particularly valuable in en-

hancing confidence in all types of oral communication - itself highly valued in the workplace - was unexpected. At the same time, the author was surprised that the graduates did not name the traditional academic skills of critical thinking, analysis and reflection - all of which tutors believed the journalism course focused on - to be particularly valuable.

The benefits of professional work experience, and the drawbacks of so much of it being unpaid, is a well-documented subject, but one that was reflected in the graduates' own experience and which tutors will have to address if those coming from poorer backgrounds are not to be disadvantaged in the race for graduate jobs. There is plenty of work to be done on how journalism skills are marketed both to students and to employers but this study does provide a few pointers.

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# Trauma journalism education: teaching merits, curricular challenges, and instructional approaches

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This study uses mixed methods to examine the state of trauma journalism education at journalism programmes. The survey of 623 faculty members from the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC)-accredited institutions reveals a gap in training that leaves prospective journalists ill-prepared to cover domestic and international violence and disasters. An analysis of journalism curricula shows most universities, if they teach trauma journalism at all, do so only in an introductory manner while covering other subjects such as interviewing and ethics. Finally, qualitative interviews with journalism faculty and professional journalists who have covered trauma provide further context supporting the need for specific resources. The study offers recommendations for supporting trauma journalism education and introducing it to journalism curricula.

**Keywords:** journalism education, trauma journalism, news violence, war journalism.