

The accreditation dilemma: for us or against us?

Accreditation. We need it to attract and recruit students to our Journalism courses. Or do we? We need it as an employment passport for our students. Or do we? It ensures quality, professionalism and high standards of Journalism. We think. Doesn't it?

Journalism tutors at universities and colleges admit to working with many vague assumptions when making decisions over whether to seek accreditation for their undergraduate and postgraduate courses. There is so little data or hard evidence out there.

As part of a review of our BA provision at Sheffield, a group of us were tasked with gathering some data on the importance of accreditation to prospective students making choices about their applications. We also surveyed current students on our Journalism Studies BA, a triple-accredited degree at a Russell Group university. This research coincided with a difficult accreditation visit from the BJTC, and a realisation that we would be forced to make some radical changes if we were to meet the new and 'tightened up' requirements. Should we stay or should we go? It was a massive decision and required some deep reflection and soul-searching – one thing was clear though, the best interests of our students had to be at the heart of the decision.

In the end, to cut a long story short, we felt that too much would be sacrificed to make way for the curriculum being imposed upon us. For example, while we fully embraced Newsdays, to comply with the 15 per student per year requirement would mean losing valuable elements of long-form journalism as well as some of the reflective elements of the degree. We believe our students need to work in a range of different types of journalism, not just 'on-the-day' news. And this takes time. We need to find space for our students to think about the 'why' as well as the 'how'.

Our MA Broadcast Journalism course is still BJTC accredited. Our BA is still NCTJ and PPA accredited.

So what did our research tell us? Would withdrawing from BJTC accreditation mean a sudden slump in numbers and a huge rise in unemployed graduates?

Recruitment

87 prospective students responded to our questionnaire given out on pre-offer Open Days. While only half claimed to have any real knowledge of Journalism accreditation, there was a general perception that it was an important factor in narrowing course selection down. Accreditation meant approval from the industry. There was also a belief that accreditation would help them get a job. The vast majority had only heard of, and were only interested in, the NCTJ. 65 felt that accreditation was very important in their degree choice, 15 that it was fairly important or an added bonus, and the remaining 7 didn't know or felt that it was not important at all.

We also asked current first years and half of the 66 who responded would not have selected Sheffield as an option if the course had not been accredited. However, the degree (in terms of reputation and content) was the most important 'volunteered' reason for choosing our course. The NCTJ was by far the most important accreditation body in the eyes of current first years.

That accreditation plays a significant role in recruitment was backed up by a survey with Journalism educators from courses across the country.

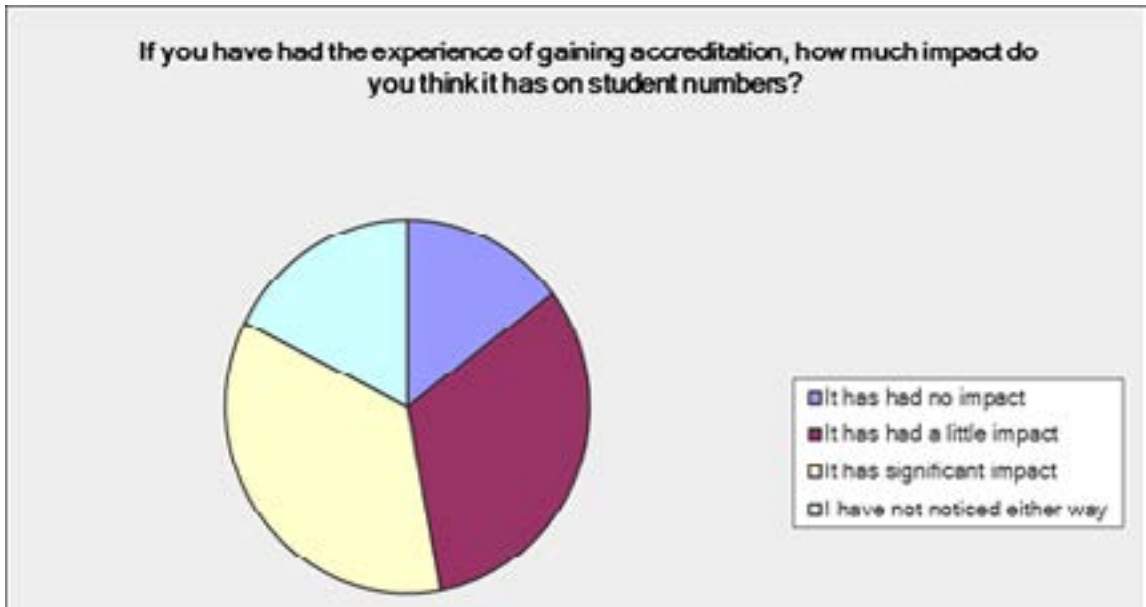


Figure 1 Impact of accreditation on recruitment

Employment

Speak to any Journalism tutor, particularly on an undergraduate degree and you will find that the spread of career ambition among students is very broad. Lily Canter, principle lecturer and subject group leader for journalism at Sheffield Hallam University, interviewed 14 editors representing all sectors of the industry. Her findings depicted ‘a changing landscape where writing skills and digital skills are held in equal regard and work experience takes precedence over qualifications’ Her research concluded that ‘accreditation was not a key factor in the employment of entry-level journalists’ (Canter, L, 2015).

Research we carried out with a different set of employers, admittedly many of whom actively employ University of Sheffield Journalism graduates, came up with a contrasting set of results. 65% of respondents felt that accreditation was very important, with 27% saying it depended on the specific job.

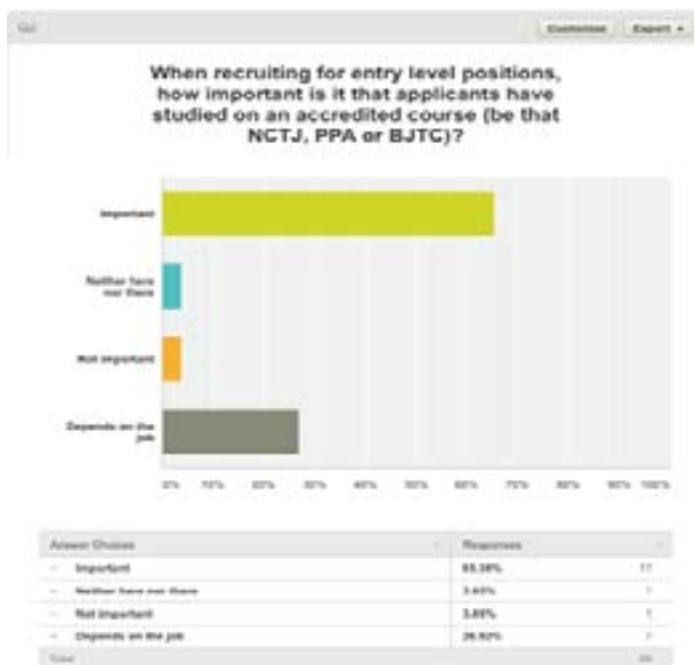


Figure 2 Employers on importance of accreditation

The employers' views on the difference in quality of graduates from accredited courses versus non-accredited courses were also clear cut. 80% felt that accreditation produced more employable students.

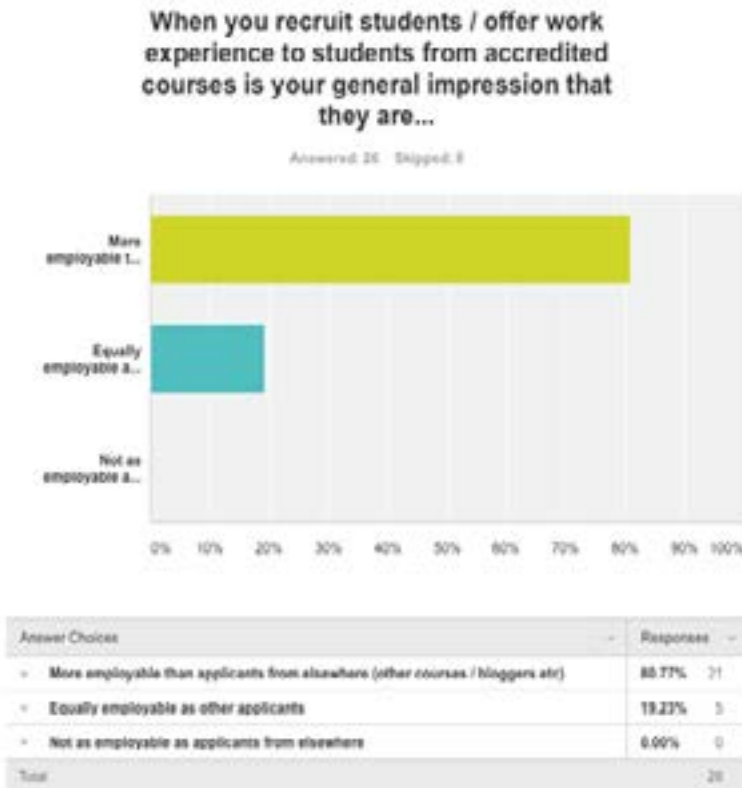


Figure 3 Employers on quality of students from accredited courses

The Journalism tutors questioned came from a range of different courses, mainly with some form of accreditation. Over 70% had courses accredited by the BJTC, 43% by the NCTJ and 25% by the PPA (some with overlaps and double or triple accreditation). There was certainly a feeling that accreditation has a positive impact on graduate employment, but the response was tentative, with the majority opting for the 'somewhat important' answer on the questionnaire.

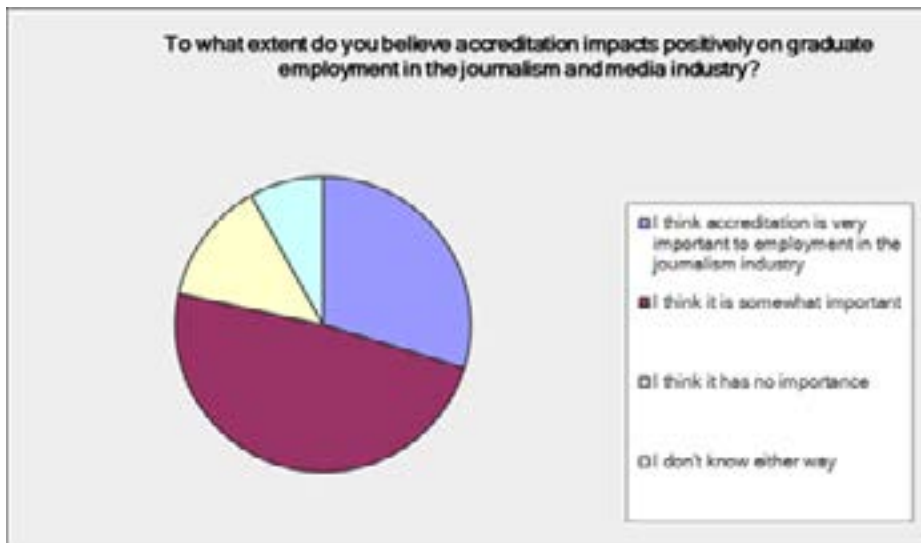


Figure 4 Journalism tutors on impact of accreditation on employment

Why seek accreditation?

The overwhelming response as to what drives courses to seek accreditation was pressure from university managers who see it as an important marketing and recruitment tool. Heads of schools and departments see the word ‘accreditation’ and make certain assumptions about quality assurance. Interestingly, although some tutors agreed with their bosses that accreditation should be a priority, others felt there was a mismatch between management perception of what accreditation might bring, and the views of the teachers themselves:

“This was imposed from above, suddenly and counter to received wisdom in the department. Felt like a senior manager ‘had an idea’ and had the power to impose it against the better judgement of those who actually do the teaching work”

“Because the university board likes accredited courses. It believes it attracts applicants...I do not think it adds much value at all to our curriculum, It does in fact constrain it”

“We are going to go for BJTC again because our head of school wants us to. I don’t have enough evidence to say, there’s no point, it’s too restrictive. So we will go for it and if it ends in disaster, it is his disaster”

Another popular reason was the bargaining tool for more resources – managers are far more willing to spend money on improving facilities if the accreditation carrot is in sight. A general perception of respectability, validity and professional ethos were popular driving forces to seek accreditation. Gaining recognition from employers and strengthening industry links were also mentioned. Obviously, some courses trying and hoping to gain accreditation do not actually achieve it for a variety of reasons. In some cases though, institutions or departments take an active decision to withdraw from accreditation or not to seek it in the first place.

Why choose *not* to seek accreditation?

A theme cropping up frequently was a feeling of conflict between what a degree is trying to provide and what the accrediting bodies think should be delivered. Journalism educators often feel caught in the middle – on one side we have university bosses (who sometimes have little understanding of the practical nature of journalism) demanding a curriculum full of rigorous theory, analysis and critical thinking and on the other side, accrediting bodies whose focus is solely on replicating the practices and processes taking place in newsrooms. While most journalism tutors, and journalism students for that matter, see the need for both elements, it can be one of the most challenging tasks of all trying to marry the two together. The sense of ‘restriction’ being imposed by accreditation requirements is a strong one. As is a lack of creativity and innovation:

“The NCTJ is very prescriptive and the narrowly-focused, which would restrict our ability to explore with our students new and innovate approaches to journalism”

“The NCTJ is expensive, draconian, out of touch and has no understanding of the idea that universities are meant to be institutions of higher education and therefore have a responsibility for the intellectual development of their students not just their training in vocational skills”

“Those teaching journalism (all with direct experience of the trade) felt it was important to devise courses rooted in practice but with significant elements of reflection and analysis. Moulding courses to fit models imposed through accreditation made it more difficult to produce something special”

“Rather than dictating curriculum, the accreditation bodies should look more qualitatively at the courses to assess how they prepare journalists for the future news industry”

“Modules have to be designed with the accreditation commitments in mind which often means you have to drop other modules which may be useful/interesting, especially to our students who may not all end up going for jobs in the journalism industry”

“Costly, rigid structure and lacks innovation, with no discernible impact on recruitment or employability”

Overall benefits

Some tutors felt strongly that their courses and students reap benefits from accreditation. A couple felt that the external input helped to ‘keep them on their toes’ and even welcomed the shaping of curriculum provi-

sion and course structure. Partnership days and conferences were also mentioned as a bonus.

Overall negative impact

The list of negatives around accreditation was a long one. The most common criticism was the lack of understanding around how HE works.

Andy Cairns, the Executive Editor of Sky Sports News, is on the NCTJ Accreditation Board and describes himself as ‘an employer trying to make sure the NCTJ and the training centres understand how the industry is changing and what employers look for’ and the skills they need students to learn. He argues that board members have a good understanding of the different types of courses out there

“Fast-track, degree, post-graduate diplomas, masters. Board members, and the best employers will know the difference in balance between academic study and the more practical journalism elements of the different courses – especially degree and post-graduate”

The prescriptive nature of the curriculum offered by accrediting bodies is a real worry for many Journalism tutors.

“Can be challenging to reconcile demands of university academic programmes and BJTC, such as number of Newsdays and work placements, without losing identity or unique teaching approaches of each course”

“Newsdays are often difficult to schedule within the university timetable as some modules by their nature need to be taught on a weekly basis, and therefore the week can’t easily be given over to journalistic production”

Professor Diane Kemp, who teaches journalism at Birmingham City University chairs the BJTC Journalism and Accreditation board is well aware that the Newsday requirement (15 per student per year) has caused controversy and explains how lengthy discussions and debates have taken place recently between industry and academic representatives.

“We know our students are going into a multiplicity of roles but we still come back to this thing our industry partners are saying, this is our bottom line that we need to ensure that if somebody comes from a BJTC accredited course, we know that this is the baseline”

The second most popular gripe emerging from the survey was the cost involved. Our department conducted an audit in 2015 to calculate accreditation expenditure when we were triple-accredited. The calculation was based on membership, panel visits, paying for student first sittings of NCTJ exams, academic staff time and professional service staff time. The galling annual figure came to £85,784.20 for the year. So perhaps the resentment around the sheer expense of buying into accreditation is hardly surprising. The pressure of preparation workload was another gripe. Another recurring theme was that accreditation bodies do not move fast enough with the times and are out of date with current practice:

“It’s a very heavy tail that’s wagging an increasingly weary dog. It’s essentially FE, so it tends to dumb down content. It’s too prescriptive, and is dominated by legacy and traditional media”

“As a former practitioner it was shocking to see how outdated and moribund these bodies have become and how they seemed not able to come together as one body representing journalism as it is today and now what it was 30 years ago”

Andy Cairns argues that this is not his experience. He suggests this criticism in itself is possibly out-dated.

“Good industry practise will look at media trends, technical advances, changing demand from the customer (reader/viewer) and adapt and make plans to adapt accordingly. It’s our responsibility to make sure that students of today are being prepared for the journalistic world of tomorrow and not that of yesterday....”

...If anything it can feel that some course leaders are slow to respond to industry changes, for example, print journalism courses, not incorporating digital journalism and inconsistent interpretations about multi-media”

Conclusion

One of the biggest challenges is undoubtedly working under the pressure of University processes and protocol. Journalism education and training does not always sit naturally in Higher Education institutions.

No matter how strong the desire of tutors to provide students with the full immersive news culture experience, some other (often very important) aspect of the course is likely to ‘get in the way’. Richard Horsman, Journalism tutor at Leeds Trinity University puts it like this:

“A big story breaks in the patch and the opportunity is there for students to gain priceless experience assisting established local and regional media in gathering audio, video and vox-pops, or to act as studio runners – but that chance is lost if the trainees are scheduled to sit an ethics test” (Horsman, 2015)

Martin Buckley, Journalism tutor at Southampton University sees the benefit of accreditation:

“The accreditors, who are mostly senior journalists themselves, provoke rather more incisive and stimulating discussions than the mutual back-scratching exercise that external examination can sometimes be. And they do mandate a level of ethics and public affairs”

But he agrees their demands leave tutors with a dilemma:

‘over how much practice and how much more intellectually broadening content is appropriate on a degree in British higher education’ (Buckley, 2016)

Despite the difficulties in reaching agreement over the perfect Journalism course and the roller coaster ride for many course leaders in relation to accreditation demands, one thing is clear; as long as these issues continue to be debated with such heat and passion by people who have students’ educational needs and employment prospects at the heart of what they do, it will be very difficult for journalism trainees to lose out. Let’s keep debating.

Surveys

July 2015: Prospective students at University of Sheffield Journalism Studies BA Open Days: 87 responses

July 2015: Current Journalism Studies BA first years at University of Sheffield: 66 responses

October 2016: Journalism tutors across a range of institutions: 40 responses

References

Buckley, M. (2016). Times Higher Education: “Does Brexit affect how universities should be teaching journalism?” Available at: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/does-brex-it-affect-how-universities-should-be-teaching-journalism> (accessed 18.7.16)

Canter, L (2015) ‘Chasing the accreditation dream: Do employers value accredited journalism courses?’ Journalism Education 4 (1) pp40-51

Horsman, R, (2015) Richardhorsman.com blogspot “Hackademic? I’d rather chew my arm off” Available at: <http://rhorsman.blogspot.co.uk/2015/07/hackademic-id-rather-chew-my-arm-off.html> (accessed 4.11.16)

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