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Rethinking quality in journalism education.

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Smaller journalism programs have much to offer

During October a debate on course quality raged across Journet—the electronic discussion list for journalism education. The debate stemmed from a posting to the list by a prospective student who wanted to know which was the best course to enrol in. Predictably, many journalism educators with a trumpet to blow contributed a strong argument as to why his or her course was superior. I even offered my twopence worth, suggesting that the discussion was too US-centric and that the student might look to Australia for her journalism education.

The issue of quality in journalism courses is the subject of an ongoing debate among members of JEA. Quality is central to notions of course accreditation which have been proposed over recent years. Yet quality is in the eye of the beholder. It is an intangible, subject to the preconceptions of those adjudging it.

The most recent contribution to this debate comes from the University of Queensland’s Professor John Henningham and appears in the Australian Journalism Review (Henningham, 1994). Henningham claims to offer his views for the sake of stimulating public debate. On that count, I have no doubt he will achieve his goal.

Henningham suggests a core curriculum for a university journalism course, the contents of which would be found in one form or another in most of our offerings. He further suggests the optimal size of a journalism school in a university should be at least that of a department, with at least six (and preferably 12) full time lecturers, of whom at least one should be a professor.

As each of Henningham’s brushstrokes is cast on this portrait of the ideal journalism school, it becomes patently obvious that only one course in Australasia could possibly fit the model: Henningham’s own University of Queensland course.

There are parts of Henningham’s article with which I agree. His core
curriculum is well formulated and his call for quality is laudable. However, his argument is blatantly dismissive of smaller journalism programs, a view which I dispute strongly.

Henningham lists the relevant stakeholders in journalism education as the public, the media industries, journalism educators, universities and professional bodies representing journalists. Yet he neglects to mention those I believe should be near the top of the list of stakeholders, perhaps eclipsed only by the public. He fails to mention the students.

I believe the needs of students should be central to any debate over quality in education. And while large journalism programs might be able to offer a great deal to the student body as a whole—such as more resources and subjects—it is all too easy for large programs to lose touch with students as individuals.

Staff in programs with fewer students are much better placed to gauge the needs and aspirations of individuals. Their program size invariably means that the small team of faculty is administering the program, teaching the students in at least some classes, organising their internships and helping place them after graduation. Similarly, students in smaller programs are more likely to know each other and develop a stronger sense of belonging and camaraderie than those who might just be insignificant faces among hundreds in a large lecture hall.

This bonding can lay an important foundation for relationships after graduation, offering a valuable network of contacts and lifelong friendships.

The larger a program gets the more likely it seems student interests will be usurped by the tangled webs of bureaucracy and the dilution of staff accountability. In smaller programs, the staff are required to pitch in and do a bit of everything. Miraculously, they normally find the time to design and deliver a range of journalism subjects, perform administrative tasks and write research articles. Large programs need more administrators and invariably sponsor specialist researchers. Time spent on administration is time not spent in the classroom, leading too often to the situation where those making the decisions about subject offerings and course requirements are those who have had the least contact with individual students. Time spent on research at the expense of teaching may well be worthwhile, but it is normally servicing the needs of stakeholders other than the students. Invariably, it means the classes of other staff are that much larger to compensate for the researchers' absence from the classroom, compounding the problems of neglected students.

Related to this is the level of accountability for the education of their students that academic staff are required to shoulder. Many of us resent the fact that in tertiary institutions actual teaching seems to take the lowest priority and receive the least recognition. It seems that teaching is meant to be just a necessary evil which interrupts academic research—the real reason you should be on staff at a university. Those of us who entered journalism education to teach find this an anathema. No matter what the institutional stance on this, the fact is that in smaller institutions it is that much more difficult for a poor teacher to remain unaccountable. There simply are not the resources to cover for a
staff member who lacks either the will or the competence for teaching. In smaller programs, administrators are too close to the students for the phenomenon to go unnoticed or to be left ignored. To the contrary, larger institutions seem to breed poor communicators and malingerers who survive at the expense of their students.

While this type of accountability may be addressed with sound recruitment and review policies, another kind of accountability can be lacking at a larger departmental or institutional level. This is the program's accountability to the individual student for the educational progress of that student through the program: educational quality control. The larger the program, the more difficult it is to keep tabs on the curriculum being taught in individual subjects and by particular instructors. Part of the notion of academic freedom is being able to teach a subject as you best conceive it. Yet central to sound educational practice is the formulating and testing of student learning outcomes. An educationally sound program should be able to vouch for the fact that its students graduate with certain testable competences. The larger the program, the more difficult it becomes for course administrators to be able to control the quality of its graduates and to be accountable for an individual student's learning.

For example, in my two years of conducting training for Rural Press, I have yet to see a graduate who has demonstrated a reasonable level of efficiency in notebook management. I have encountered many with an admirable knowledge of journalism ethics, media ownership and foreign press systems. But I have yet to see a graduate who can demonstrate a reliable system of note taking, storage and retrieval. I am grateful for that, because it gives me something to teach them. Such a system is vital to sound journalism practice and helps defend many a defamation writ. But it is the kind of fundamental skill which can be forgotten too easily in course design and delivery, particularly in a larger program. All stakeholders in journalism education stand to lose if such a competence is lacking, but who is willing to stand and be accountable for its delivery? I suggest that such quality control is more easily implemented in smaller courses where course administrators are better positioned to monitor the exit competences of the course as a whole and gauge each student's educational progress.

Large programs boast abundant resources, which can look particularly impressive during the vacation periods when you are most likely to be given your guided tour. More important from the student's perspective is the per capita resource; the extent to which individual students will have meaningful access during semester high points. Smaller programs rarely can boast the total complement of resources their larger cousins, but many will argue that their students get quality time with the limited resources that are available. Clearly, this is a question of scale and will vary between institutions. But the claim of the larger programs to extensive resources is too often left unchallenged. Also relevant here is the fact that hardware resources are becoming less central to the practice of journalism and the experience of journalism education. Software which performs the recording or editing task or replicates the reporting
environment is fast replacing the need for expensive resource infrastructures of the past.

A distinct advantage of a large journalism program is the diversity of experience and interests of its faculty and the stimulation of debate and information exchange in the coffee room or the staff seminar. Too often faculty in small programs have felt isolated, well behind the debate of current issues in journalism education. For many of us, the Journalism Education Association conference and the *Australian Journalism Review* have provided the only opportunities to share our educational and scholarly endeavours with our colleagues. That is changing at a rapid rate. Most of us now have access to electronic mail and are able to monitor and participate in debates on any number of issues to do with journalism and its teaching. Many of us are members of JEAnet—a discussion list established by our membership for information exchange and debate. Some are members of other discussion lists, including CARR-L, JournalNet, Stumedia and Journet. I recently conducted a research project monitoring discussions on the latter two lists over a single week. In that period there were 187 postings to those lists from journalism educators and students amounting to 47,000 words of information and debate on such topics as journalism curricula, instructional methods, ethical and industrial issues, equipment and employment opportunities. Journet alone has more than 870 subscribers interested in matters to do with journalism education. It has become what the US author Howard Rheingold (1994) has coined a "virtual community": an ongoing conference in cyberspace with participants sharing information and debating issues. No longer should faculty in small programs feel isolated. There is one big coffee room debate going on out there that they can plug into at any time.

Our students can also use the Net to reap the advantages of a large program without needing to suffer its shortcomings. Stumedia is a discussion list for journalism students and editors of campus publications. Some students use it to share news and feature story ideas with colleagues at other institutions. In the week I was monitoring its postings, a student from Queensland University of Technology offered her story idea about youth suicide. A fellow participant in Canada followed up on the story idea with a series of answers to frequently asked questions about suicide obtained, coincidentally, from an Australian source on the Internet. The social network had extended from Australia to a United States-based discussion list to a Canadian member who happened to have accessed an Australian information source and shared this with the international body of subscribers.

This illustration raises a more fundamental question about the value of larger courses in an age of electronic research and publishing. Most of us are already re-evaluating our journalism programs in the light of technological developments. We have little choice as newspapers begin to feature Internet addresses in their Letters columns, a television program like *The Times* defies the reporting practices of its genre and the *Sydney Morning Herald* starts construction of a cable television studio in its newsroom. The convergence of media necessitates a rethinking of
journalism education at every level. We are entering an age in which there will be a multitude of journals and it will be a very brave journalism course, large or small, which will be able to claim proprietorship over all of them. Instead, our courses will need to take one of two paths. They will need to either a) provide students with a generic introduction to journalism, giving a broad skill base for application in any media hybrid or b) offer boutique courses offering students professional competence in practicing a brand of journalism targeted at a particular media hybrid. In effect, the dilemma is similar to one we have faced for the past several years: whether students should all study print, radio and television journalism to a professional level or specialise in one medium for the latter part of their courses. The oncoming market fragmentations will force our hands on this decision by splintering the options even further with the appearance of each new media form.

Which courses are best poised to meet this challenge: the larger courses, saddled with tenured staff whose journalism and research is entrenched in the past and whose institutional bureaucracies might require a two-year delay on new course offerings; or the smaller, boutique programs, which can adapt their offerings and tailor their courses without enormous staffing or bureaucratic implications? My hunch is the latter.

This notion of a smorgasbord of journalism products and a variety of journalism courses to cater for them highlights the value of course diversity and independence which seems to have escaped the proponents of the “Big is Beautiful” argument. It is quite ironic that the same people who have been so vocal in their opposition to concentrated media ownership now propose an optimum course structure which would, if implemented, limit journalism education in Australia to a single institution. No matter what the virtues of a particular large course, surely the public as a stakeholder is better served by journalists with a range of backgrounds, perspectives and approaches to their journalism. The idea of just one or two courses being deemed “optimum” counters the foundational principles of freedom of choice and expression we all espouse and reeks of political correctness gone horribly wrong.

Nevertheless, Henningham (p. 93) makes a worthwhile suggestion that smaller courses might combine to make their subjects available to students from other courses. This already happens to an extent, with co-operative ventures in practical projects, internship placements and cross-credits on courses. There may be scope for more co-operation as institutions develop and market their own specialties.

In conclusion, journalism educators working in smaller programs must recognise that the benefits of being small can outweigh the shortcomings. Nevertheless, there are many more important factors contributing to quality journalism than the size of a program. The forgotten stakeholders in journalism education—the students—deserve improvements in a number of areas. When they enrol in a journalism course they should find a flexible administration; a diversity of offerings; equitable access to resources; and an informed and accountable faculty with a vision of journalism in the new era. These are goals that all of us—large and
small—should be striving for. The other major stakeholder—the public—deserves no less.

References:

Mark Pearson is Associate Professor of Journalism at Bond University. This is an edited version of his presidential address to the Journalism Education Association at the National Press Club, Canberra, 30 November 1994.