900 into 300 won’t go:
Are Australia’s journalism courses producing too many graduates?

By Roger Patching

Discusses the potential oversupply of journalism graduates.

The author’s MA (Hons) thesis for the University of Wollongong involves a comparative study of the 22 vocational University-based journalism courses in Australia, including four newcomers who are yet to produce a graduate. James Cook University of North Queensland and Griffith University’s Nathan (Brisbane) campus and Monash University’s Gippsland campus took their first journalism students in 1995, and Griffith’s Gold Coast campus admitted students to their journalism program for the first time in 1996.

It is a major survey aimed at comparing the courses across a range of areas, including a brief history of each course (since most will be adequately covered in Charles Stuart’s forthcoming PhD thesis), the structure and contents of each course, admissions criteria, admission and graduation statistics, and teaching staff, their backgrounds and workloads.

One area which has always troubled the author, since the explosion in journalism courses in the former Colleges of Advanced Education (CAE) sector in the early Seventies, and more particularly since the ‘mini explosion’ of new courses in the Nineties, has been how many students have been graduating from the undergraduate and postgraduate vocational journalism courses big and small around the country.

Add to that collective figure those who do a few journalism subjects in one of the larger programs and can claim to have taken as many journalism subjects as graduates from some of the smaller programs; those who study journalism at a private college and those who graduate from the various University communications and media studies courses, or graduate from a particular discipline like politics or economics with a view to becoming a journalist, and the figure would be much higher.

The aim of the section of the survey on admissions and graduation

statistics was to find out how many students would graduate from the various University journalism courses in 1995 into what is a shrinking mainstream media job market.

While many of the journalism lecturers interviewed during the author's fieldwork say they are always at pains to ensure students do not have unrealistic expectations of their job prospects, anecdotal evidence from the author's own students over the past few years (and others in more recent times) suggests that while they realise not all graduates will get a media-related job, let alone one in the mainstream media, almost all believe they will be one of the lucky ones.

While lecturers can talk themselves hoarse about the relatively-limited opportunities in mainstream media nowadays, many graduates from journalism programs believe they have a 'better than average' chance of picking up one of the limited mainstream jobs.

At least 20 of the 35 students who completed CSU’s BA (Communication) Broadcast Journalism strand in 1995 believed they should be considered in the 'Top 10' in the group and should at least get a position on a regional radio or television station. Journalism academics know that will not be the case.

**Background**

At the JEA Annual Conferences in the late Seventies and early Eighties, lecturers from the various courses present quoted their admissions and expected graduation figures for the particular year, and they were entered into the minutes of that year’s Annual General Meeting.

Unfortunately, the statistics were never complete as some institutions' representatives didn’t know the figures or weren’t prepared to release them, and other institutions were not represented. The author joined JEA in 1979 (originally it was called the Australian Association for Tertiary Education in Journalism) and his copies of the AGM minutes from then until the ‘show and tell’ practice was abandoned in the mid-Eighties, demonstrate the trend academic colleagues have all experienced – that of the increasing popularity of journalism courses leading to increased quotas or intakes and more courses. At many Universities, journalism gets extra students when other courses can’t fill their quota.

As an example of the early trend, the author took two of the 'major players' in journalism education today (and in those earlier days), Deakin and Queensland Universities. In 1979, Deakin enrolled 105 and graduated 20 while Queensland University enrolled 380 and graduated 40. Two years later, Deakin enrolled 200 having graduated 20 in 1980, while Queensland University enrolled 280 having graduated 40 in the
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Previous year. By 1984, Deakin was enrolling 150 and graduating about 15, and while the admission figure was unavailable, Queensland University graduated 20. While Deakin and Queensland University take large numbers into first year journalism, many drop out during or at the end of the first year. Both Universities allow students from all disciplines to take journalism subjects, and some drop out because they either don't like journalism or find it too demanding. Others take only a couple of subjects as electives in another degree.

Senior Lecturer in Journalism at the University of Southern Queensland, Charles Stuart, in his unpublished PhD thesis on the history of journalism education in Australia, has produced figures on the numbers of students graduating from journalism courses from 1974-89, but again they are incomplete. Figures for four of the institutions – Deakin, the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, the University of Queensland and the South Australian Colleges of Advanced Education (now the University of South Australia) were either unavailable, or only partially available. The most complete figures are from 1988 and 1989, and cover seven institutions – Canberra CAE (now the University of Canberra), RMIT, Mitchell CAE (now Charles Sturt University - Mitchell), the Western Australian Institute of Technology (now Curtin), the Darling Downs Institute of Advanced Education (now USQ), the New South Wales Institute of Technology (now the University of Technology, Sydney) and Capricornia Institute of Advanced Education (now the Central Queensland University). In 1988 and 1989, the seven institutions graduated 152 and 156 journalism students respectively (Stuart, unpublished thesis 1995). By comparison, in 1995 those same seven institutions would graduate more than twice as many – a total of 332.

Bruce Malloy's 1989 survey covered all tertiary communications courses in Australia, then taught at a total of 33 institutions. He concluded that more than 26,764 students were undertaking communications courses in Australian tertiary institutions (Malloy 1991:71). He also found more than 3,000 students were studying journalism at Bachelor level, mostly in Victoria and Queensland (Malloy:81). He predicted an oversupply of journalism graduates in the following three years (Malloy:85). In his list of institutions teaching journalism, Malloy included five not included in the author's survey – Macquarie University, Ballarat CAE, La Trobe University, Victoria College - Rusden and Warrnambool IAE. The author did not include these either because they are not vocation-based courses, or they have been absorbed into other institutions in the round of tertiary amalgamations of the late Eighties.
On Malloy’s figures, 3,083 were studying journalism in 1989. The enrolments at three of the institutions the author ignored were unavailable, but reduce the figure by the enrolments of the other two (125) and there were still nearly 3,000 enrolled in tertiary journalism courses in 1989 (Malloy:89).

Appendix 1, and the discussion under ‘Findings’ later, shows the growth in the number of courses, and more particularly in their enrolments and numbers of graduates, has continued in a decade when the number of jobs in the mainstream media until the early Nineties seemed to be rising and then in the past few years has been dropping.

Through the eighties CSU-Mitchell, like most of the other courses, could claim that up to three-quarters of their journalism students had media-related jobs by Graduation Day. Nowadays, they’d be lucky if more than half were working for a newspaper, magazine, radio or television newsroom by the time they returned to Bathurst to officially graduate.

By way of comparison, more than 400 Colleges and Universities in the United States have a total journalism enrolment of about 130,000 and graduate about 34,000 each year (Beasley 1995). In the past few years some journalism programs in the United States have been eliminated, and others reduced and/or combined with other communication programs. Among the reasons given have been that the programs have become too costly or too vocational in nature for their respective Universities (Beasley 1995) and at the other end of the scale, were not delivering enough media jobs to their graduates (Lloyd 1995).

The last reason bears remembering in the climate of Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) Quality Assurance Reviews and DEETYA’s (Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs under the Howard Government) seemingly-unending demands for graduate and other statistics.

Several of the Journalism Coordinators interviewed for the author’s survey said their Vice Chancellors (or Senior University Administrations) are considering changing courses – not only journalism courses – (and some have already made changes) to make them more acceptable to industry so their graduates stand a better chance of getting jobs. University Administrations are becoming more concerned about the number of relevant jobs their graduates are getting.

Findings

From the table (Appendix 1), it can be seen that 845 students
completed journalism studies of varying lengths at 18 journalism courses around the country in 1995.

Broken down state by state, it shows New South Wales with five courses graduating 275, Queensland, with eight courses (but only five with students completing last year) graduating 185, Victoria with three courses graduating 195, Western Australia’s three courses graduating 115, and South Australia’s one journalism course contributing 35 graduates and the ACT course adding another 40.

Course coordinators say females outnumber males by at least two to one in their courses, some putting the figure as high as four to one. The highest figure came from Wendy Bilboe at the University of Canberra, who says her course is 85 per cent female. If the ratio is two to one, that means a little over 560 female and about 280 male graduates joined the journalism job market in November, 1995. If four to one is closer to the mark the figures become about 670 women to roughly 170 men. Obviously the accurate figures lie somewhere in between. Whatever the figure, it's a lot of would-be journalists.

The figures, with the exception of the University of Technology Sydney, represent only the graduates from undergraduate journalism programs and the two programs (Murdoch and Wollongong) with only postgraduate journalism courses. The UTS graduates figure (60) represents roughly 35 undergraduates and 25 from their postgraduate program.

The figures represent only approximate numbers as in most cases the precise figures were not available at the time the author did his interviews, and the number was a well-educated guess.

If a smattering of graduates from the various postgraduate programs attached to the larger undergraduate schools is added, the realistic figure was close to 900.

Add to that the enrolments in the four courses yet to graduate a student, and expected modest increases in some of the existing programs, and by the end of 1998, Australia’s 22 journalism programs will be graduating more than 1,000 students a year.

And how many students were enrolled in journalism programs at the beginning of 1995? From the author’s survey, about 2,322. The two biggest programs, at Deakin and Queensland Universities, had already experienced drop-outs by the end of the first semester. Deakin had dropped from 225 enrolments on campus (plus 227 either off campus or at Warrnambool) to 216 in Geelong and a bigger drop-out among distance education students. Queensland University lost 150 of their 400-strong intake between first and second semesters.
But even erring on the conservative side (and allowing for about 1500 students in each of the second and third years of the various undergraduate programs, doing postgraduate programs or continuing their journalism studies by distance education or part-time), more than 5,000 students were taking vocation-based journalism at Australian Universities in 1995. And the figures don’t look like dropping much in the near future.

With so many students graduating each year, where are the jobs? While most of the course coordinators believe most of their graduates got jobs (very few kept accurate records of their graduates’ destinations but drew on anecdotal evidence), few suggested the majority got media-related jobs, let alone jobs in the mainstream media.

Trying to get an accurate idea of how many entry-level jobs there are for journalists each year is not easy.

The various journalism course coordinators around the country either didn’t want to venture a guess or had a ‘gut feeling’ that it would be a couple of hundred across Australia. Charles Stuart was the only one prepared to volunteer a firm figure – between 300 and 350 entry-level jobs a year.

DEETYA surveys occupations where there are perceived workforce shortages, but according to John Turnbull of the Occupational Analysis Branch in DEETYA’s Sydney offices, that’s not the case in journalism. He says there’s been an oversupply for some years, so they don’t survey the area.

During the production of this paper, the Federal Government released a report titled Australia’s Workforce 2005: Jobs in the future which said that while jobs in the communication industries dropped 1.5 per cent between 1986-94, it predicted they will rise by 3.3 per cent between 1994-2005 (Riley 1995).

The Graduate Careers Council of Australia produces a national survey of graduate destinations which throws some light on how many graduates have got jobs by the end of April of the year following the completion of their course.

In 1992, 67.5 per cent of all graduates responded to the survey. In the sub-category of Communication and Journalism under the general heading of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, almost 45 per cent of the 842 respondents had found full-time employment: 8.4 per cent in government jobs, and 31 per cent in private industry. The category of Communication and Journalism includes all courses loosely labelled ‘communication’. In that same year, 7 per cent of the 1,525 Humanities
graduates who responded to the survey – a total 107 – listed their job as 'journalism' (Graduate Destination Survey 1992:5,17 & 34).

In the following year (from a response rate of 65 per cent), of the total of 938 respondents in the Communication and Journalism category, 40.6 per cent were in full-time work, 8 per cent in government jobs, and 29.9 per cent in private industry. Of the 1,617 Humanities graduates who responded, 9 per cent (or 146) reported they were working as journalists or authors (Graduate Destination Survey 1993:5,18 & 34).

The 1995 survey (of 1994 graduates) had a response rate of 62.2 per cent. In the Communication and Journalism category, from a total number of respondents of 1,003, 43.8 per cent has found employment by the end of April, 1995, 8.4 per cent in various government positions, and 29.8 per cent in private industry. Of the 1,737 Humanities graduates who responded, 8.6 per cent put themselves in the category of journalist or author, a total of 149 (Graduate Destination Survey 1994:5,19 & 34).

Bruce Guthrie, a former Careers Adviser at the University of Sydney, coordinates the production of the annual surveys from the central-western New South Wales township of Mandurama (west of Bathurst). He points out the figures include either all Humanities students who responded, or all those who took a communication course of some description. He says that's as close as his figures come to narrowing the national figures down to how many journalism jobs University graduates got in each of the three years quoted.

He says from his experience as a Careers Adviser over many years of talking to high school and first-year University students, those who say they want to be journalists – and from his experience there were plenty of them – they had what he called 'an unhelpfully narrow idea of what constituted journalism, and what a journalist did’ (Guthrie 29/11/95).

The author approached the federal office of the MEAA for a 'ball park' figure on how many entry-level journalism jobs they thought would be available across Australia for 1995's graduates. Mike Sutherland, an Assistant Federal Secretary of the MEAA, said he thought there would be somewhere between 200 and 300. (Sutherland 1995). At best that's three graduates for each journalism job.

The Western Australian Secretary of the MEAA, Chris Smyth, says there are about 10,000 people on the union's 'books'. Of those, about 6,000 work in the media, 2,000 are freelancers, and the remaining 2,000 are either in public relations or on the 'unattached' list. He says in general, journalists are staying in their jobs longer, but in the lower grades, the traditional movement of young journalists wanting to travel
(overseas etc.) continues. He adds that in his state at least, and he believes the trend is nationwide, the Perth media are taking all graduates, but not necessarily all journalism graduates, but in country and suburban media, it is almost totally journalism graduates (Smyth 1995).

The author asked all the journalism educators interviewed what trends they had noticed in the job market in recent years. Most acknowledged that the majority of their graduates wanted to work in the mainstream media, but agreed many would have to take other jobs while they waited for their opportunity on a mainstream newspaper, magazine, radio or television station.

Most said the best of their students ended up in the mainstream media - even if it was with a suburban throwaway, country bi-weekly, or small country radio or TV station initially. Only the 'best of the best' ended up in the plumb jobs in the capital city media outlets.

So where are the jobs emerging, since the traditional employers, that graduates have relied on for so long, seem not to be taking as many at entry level in recent years?

Most noted the explosion in desktop publishing as giving many graduates the opportunity to produce boutique publications - small magazines, newsletters and the like - as their first job.

At Edith Cowan University in Perth, for instance, realising the competition for mainstream jobs from graduates of the long-established Curtin University program and the relatively-new Murdoch University Graduate Diploma, Journalism Coordinator Doug White emphasises the niche market of newsletter production. In the final year of Edith Cowan's course each student produces a four-page newsletter for a real client. Some end up getting a part-time job continuing to produce the newsletter for that client. Often it leads to offers to produce newsletters from other associated organisations or groups, or the students find more clients for themselves. Also, because of the relatively small number of journalism subjects in the Edith Cowan course (three journalism subjects combined with other media subjects to make the equivalent of a minor), students tend to take other media-related subjects in areas like radio and television production and/or public relations. This combination opens up wider job opportunities for a media 'generalist'. Such is the case in a number of other courses, too.

Because of the number of journalism courses in Queensland - and south-east Queensland in particular - Michael Meadows, who is coordinating one of the newest courses at Griffith University's Nathan campus in Brisbane, says he won't be pushing mainstream media jobs as a
serious option for the majority of his students. The first graduates from the course at the Nathan campus will finish in 1997, and chances are, Michael says, they won’t end up in mainstream media jobs.

Like many of his fellow journalism coordinators across the country, Michael says many students do journalism as a ‘stepping stone’ to other jobs. He says they have a distinct advantage over other Arts graduates because of their critical thinking skills and their advanced writing and evaluation skills.

Matthew Ricketson, the Journalism Coordinator at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, says one employer, Information Australia, which produces books and newsletters, has taken five or six RMIT graduates in each of the past two years to write and edit boutique newsletters.

A number of the coordinators said their recent graduates have been getting jobs in public relations and promotions. In most cases, their courses were structured so they could take a number of subjects in public relations and have a ‘second string to their bow’.

Wendy Bacon from UTS says the ABC, SBS and Fairfax still take UTS graduates (especially postgraduates), but she’s noticed a trend recently of undergraduates going on to postgraduate study (especially the Law course at the University of New South Wales), or to work on trade journals, in public relations, or on alternative publications and in newsletter production.

The view of some of the coordinators is reflected in the comment of Queensland University of Technology Journalism Coordinator, Len Granato, who says he is not in the employment business. ‘While I am as proud as hell when they do well, I am here to educate them in the hope they will improve the state of journalism’.

Queensland University’s Journalism Department Head, Bruce Grundy, estimates that only half to three-quarters of those who make it to the final year of their program are serious about working in the mainstream media. ‘If they really mean to get a job (in the mainstream media) at the end of their journalism studies, they will’.

He’s noticed graduates ending up in research jobs, marketing, and even as politicians.

John Hurst, Journalism Coordinator at Deakin University, says some of his graduates also end up in public relations, and some in the ‘elite’ area of PR for Parliamentarians.

Are the various journalism coordinators worried about the numbers studying journalism around the country?
While many of the coordinators were confident the majority of their graduates who wanted jobs in mainstream media would eventually get them, some were worried by the large numbers studying journalism across the country.

Curtin University’s Lawrie Apps says bluntly: ‘There are too many people studying journalism in Australia’.

At the other end of the scale is Steve McIlwaine, who coordinates another of the young journalism courses in Australia – at James Cook University of North Queensland in Townsville. His course took its first 50 students in 1995. The numbers nationally don’t worry him at all. ‘Journalism graduates are excellent material for a range of areas. Their employment rates are significantly higher than general Arts graduates’.

Newcastle University’s Lynette Sheridan Burns says she’s concerned that so many of the country’s journalism students kid themselves with the unrealistic expectation that they will get a job in the mainstream media.

Discussion

While journalism educators usually readily bask in the success of their top students, shouldn’t we be equally concerned about the job prospects of all our graduates?

While we are concerned about the state of the media – from a myriad of angles from questions of concentration of ownership, ethical breaches and what we see as low standards of grammar and spelling – and should be using every opportunity or forum to highlight those concerns, shouldn’t we be equally concerned with the large number of graduates entering the job market each year with little chance of a job in a media-related area?

I am not saying that working for the Nine Network, the ABC, Fairfax or News Limited are the only rewarding jobs for journalism graduates. What I am saying is that after more than 18 years teaching journalism, a job reporting for a regional newspaper, radio or television station after they graduate, leading on to a job later in the media in one of the capital cities (or even a job as a foreign correspondent) is the aspiration of many of the students with whom I’ve come in contact. During the course of my fieldwork over the past 15 months, I’ve also had the opportunity to talk to students at a number of journalism courses. And while there is nothing wrong with aspiring to the top, and no doubt many will get there, far more won’t. From my research there’s one journalism job for every three or four graduates from the various vocation-based courses.

None of the course coordinators interviewed has seen a drop in their
quota in recent years. For those who have a course quota (as opposed to those who take all comers), their quota has either stayed much the same in the past five years, or has increased.

Journalism courses have become very popular in the past two decades, with the numbers of applicants far out-stripping the available positions. The courses enjoy high tertiary entrance scores for admission. The tertiary entrance score needed for admission dropped slightly in 1994 (and dipped again in 1995), reflecting a general downturn in the numbers seeking admission to the tertiary education sector generally (Illing & Tideman 1995).

This downturn could lead – as it did at CSU in 1995 – to pressure to take more students into the popular journalism program.

But are we doing anyone a favour by increasing intakes further to help beleaguered University administrations keep their numbers up?

Through the Eighties CSU (then MCAE) had a policy of restricting the quota of those doing journalism so it didn’t flood the New South Wales market, only to see courses spring up to cater to the un-met demand for places.

While it’s not being suggested that the number of courses should be restricted in any way – it couldn’t be done anyway, except by direct intervention by the Federal Government or by a University administration cutting a popular course, which is unlikely – journalism educators need to think seriously about the ramifications of more than 1,000 journalism graduates a year within two or three years for only a few hundred mainstream journalism jobs.

Research needs to be done into journalism graduate job destinations nationally, the job satisfaction levels of those graduates and alternative job prospects. Journalism educators should also be looking closely at what they are teaching and the impact now, and in the future, of the so-called convergence of technologies.

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**Appendix 1**

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