

Australian Learning and Teaching Fellowship

Agreed aims, principles, models and skills for Journalism capstone units in Australian universities

Associate Professor Trevor Cullen
Australian Learning and Teaching Fellow
Edith Cowan University
www.journalismcapstoneunits.org

Introduction

This document presents the findings from an Australian Learning and Teaching Fellowship (ALTF) study conducted in late 2015 and 2016, and seeks endorsement from the Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia (JERAA) Executive members on agreed aims, principles, models and skills, especially in regard to the demonstration of required graduate skills and capabilities. The final report will be published in February 2017, and final stage of the study (March – June 2017), will organize workshops to support journalism educators in the design or redesign of capstone units. Ultimately, such an agreement will provide strong evidence that journalism programs in Australia are in line with the government's AQF level 7 standards for Bachelor degrees. Moreover, graduates will be enabled to demonstrate evidence to both educators and employers that they have acquired agreed skills and competencies for employment in a whole range of digital media and communications industries.

Background to the study

The concept of capstone units is gaining currency within the Australian Higher Education system with a growing focus on enhancing graduate employability and assuring graduate outcomes. Just over half of the universities in Australia that teach journalism (16 out of 30), embed capstone units in their programs. This ALTF study was divided into three stages. The first stage involved face-to-face interviews with journalism academics at 16 universities in five States across Australia, to discover what type of capstone unit(s) they use, the principles they employ and the skills students need to demonstrate and apply. This data then underwent a validation process to decide on agreed aims, principles, models and skills for journalism capstone units in Australian universities.

Australian Qualification Framework (AQF)

A major factor influencing the growing emphasis of the Australian Higher Education system on capstone units is the government's increasing focus on enhancing graduate

employability and assuring graduate outcomes. In fact, the Australian Qualifications Network (AQF) has published statements of what skills and knowledge graduates in Australian universities should achieve when they complete a Level 7 qualification (a Bachelor's degree). The Qualification Standards are a set of **requirements**, in the form of a legislative instrument, which are binding on Higher Education providers.

AQF Level 7 criteria

Summary:

Graduates at this level will have broad and coherent knowledge and skills for professional work and/or further learning.

Knowledge:

Graduates at this level will have broad and coherent theoretical and technical knowledge with depth in one or more disciplines or areas of practice.

Skills:

Graduates at this level will have well-developed cognitive, technical and communication skills to select and apply methods and technologies to:

- analyse and evaluate information to complete a range of activities;
- analyse, generate and transmit solutions to unpredictable and sometimes complex problems;
- transmit knowledge, skills and ideas to others.

Application of skills and knowledge

Graduates at level 7 will apply knowledge and skills to demonstrate autonomy, well-developed judgement and responsibility in contexts that require self-directed work and learning. Furthermore, the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) will apply the Threshold Standards, including the Qualification Standards, when deciding whether to grant registration or renew a provider's registration or to accredit courses. It seems sensible, therefore, to ensure journalism capstone units be framed within the context of the AQF summary statements, and that a capstone unit adheres to the standards outlined in the AQF at level 7.

The validation process

Data was collected from face-to-face interviews with more than 30 journalism academics at 16 Australian universities. These universities were chosen either because they teach capstone units or similar subjects without using the term 'capstone'. The main focus of the study was to decide on agreed aims of journalism capstone units, a list of skills to demonstrate and what models to use. To avoid extending the research process with more data collection and discussions, the author selected journalism academics from five universities in Melbourne who were considered representative of the diverse range of the journalism academics in Australia, especially in terms of age and the time spent working as journalists or teachers or both. This group met at the

Victoria State Library in late August 2016 to discuss the second stage of the study – the validation process.

The purpose of the meeting was to:

- present feedback and findings on journalism capstone units collected by the author as part of his ALTF study;
- discuss and identify in the context of the AQF level 7 statement, the skills and knowledge required by students to successfully complete a capstone unit;
- examine various models of capstone units and identify possible model(s) appropriate to journalism courses in Australian universities.

1. Agreed aims of journalism capstone units

There was an extended discussion as to what was and should be the nature of a capstone unit. At issue was whether the capstone unit should be primarily a means of learning new knowledge and skills or, while still being a learning experience, be primarily aimed at allowing students to apply their mastery and synthesis of the knowledge and skills gained over the course of their degree or major in journalism.

There was general agreement that a journalism capstone unit should:

- result in a publishable outcome;
- provide an opportunity to demonstrate core journalism skills;
- be student-centred and require students to articulate what they wanted to achieve and how they proposed to achieve their aim.

2. Agreed principles for Journalism capstone units

The validation group agreed on a set of 6 principles, with the understanding that principles provide a guide to the nature and unique importance of the capstone experience in the student journey to graduation and beyond. These principles were seen as similar to the five principles mentioned by the majority of 30 journalism academics in face-to-face interviews. However, it was agreed that this list provides clearer content and direction.

Transition:

Assist students to develop a sense of professional identity and support them to manage their career planning and development.

Integration and closure:

Enable students to attain a sense of completion and an understanding of what it means to be a graduate and a global citizen.

Diversity:

Enhance students' capacity to engage with diversity in professional contexts.

Engagement:

Require students to assume active roles and to apply their learning in realistic, authentic and unfamiliar contexts, and to take responsibility for their own work.

Assessment:

Align assessment practice to agreed capstone principles. Ask students to reflect on their own capabilities and performance.

Evaluation:

Regular evaluations contribute to the demonstration of student attainment of discipline learning outcomes.

Skills:

Identify core pivotal journalism skills for demonstration and application – writing, story telling, digital broadcast competencies across all platforms, professional publishable content, producing to deadline and reflective analysis.

3. Agreed models of journalism capstone units

There are three models of journalism capstone units currently used within Australian universities:

- an industry placement
- a newsroom simulation or other in-house authentic learning experiences such as publishing in a web-based paper/journal
- a journalism project

The validation group considered the industry placement to be valuable but increasingly difficult to secure, of variable quality and non-inclusive. The newsroom simulation offered an authentic learning experience and an opportunity to demonstrate strengths. At the same time, it was resource intensive.

The journalism project

This was seen to offer scope for platform neutral and across-platform journalism practice and the opportunity to engage in extended research and analysis. Also, it was seen as a means by which students could demonstrate course learning outcomes, knowledge, skills and abilities. In summary, the validation group thought each of the models had value and should be retained, perhaps as Capstone 1 and Capstone 2. There was general agreement that a project unit should be supported by rigorous intended learning outcomes which, while not overly restricting student choice of topic, should ensure that unit outcomes were comparable for all students.

4. Agreed list of skills to demonstrate

The range of skills suggested by 30 journalism academics in the 2016 OLT Fellowship project, and from 50 news editors in the 2014 OLT research report on industry needs and graduates attributes, was seen by the validation group as comprehensive but believed that students would not have to demonstrate every skill with writing, research

and analysis as being core skills. It was suggested that any skills list should make it clear that the essential journalism skills must be platform neutral.

Additional suggestions for skills to be added to the list were:

- Audio (to replace the medium specific radio)
- Advanced media literacy skills
- Knowledge of the contemporary and emerging media landscape.

Unresolved was whether a capstone unit, or indeed any other unit in the course should necessarily include skills development related to future employment options, for example, freelance operations, start-up enterprises, contract negotiation and fee setting. Given concerns about a crowded curriculum and the varying policy requirements of the different universities, this matter is probably best left to individual universities to decide. Please view the list on the last page.

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Contact details:

Dr. Trevor Cullen

Associate Professor of Journalism

Australian Learning and Teaching Fellow

Edith Cowan University| Mount Lawley

Western Australia | WA 6050

T: 08 6304 6354| **m:** 0404 173 352

w: www.trevorcullen.id.au www.journalismcapstoneunits.org

Educators are encouraged to select from this list of agreed skills

1. Disciplinary skills:

- Story telling skills
- Writing/grammar skills
- Ability to produce to deadline
- Create content of a professional publishable standard
- Generate story ideas
- Ability to pitch ideas
- Edit
- Verification skills
- Extensive social media presence/branding

2. Skills across all platforms

- Audio
- Video
- Photography
- Broadcast in various formats
- Ability to publish across platforms

2. Professional skills

- Ethical practitioner
- Seek truth, accuracy, balance and fairness
- Mindful practitioner – reflects on consequences
- Knowledge and understanding of media law
- Media literacy skills
- Knowledge of the contemporary and emerging media landscape
- Self development skills
- Resourcefulness and resilience

3. Personal skills:

- Good oral and communication skills
- Interpersonal skills
- Team player

4. Entrepreneurial skills –

- Build and sustain audiences across platforms

5. Research and analytical skills -

- How to learn, think and problem solve.