

Chasing the accreditation dream : do employers value accredited journalism courses

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Published version

CANTER, Lily (2015). Chasing the accreditation dream : do employers value accredited journalism courses. *Journalism Education : The Journal of the Association of Journalism Education*, 4 (1), 40-52.

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Chasing the accreditation dream: Do employers value accredited journalism courses or are higher education institutions pursuing an archaic endorsement scheme?

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Abstract

A third of the UK's 300 undergraduate and postgraduate journalism courses are accredited by at least one of the main accreditation bodies (NCTJ, BJTC, PPA) illustrating the marketing value universities place on such schemes in an increasingly competitive marketplace. Yet questions continue to be raised amongst academics and practitioners over the ongoing value and relevance of such accreditation schemes in a diversifying industry which currently places great emphasis on digital skills. This exploratory research is the first independent study to date to examine the value of accreditation to employers via interviews with 14 editors representing all sectors of the industry. The findings depict a changing landscape where writing skills and digital skills are held in equal regard and work experience takes precedent over qualifications. It also reveals that accreditation is not a key factor in the employment of entry level journalists.

KEYWORDS: accreditation; journalism; education; employment; digital skills; professionalisation

Introduction

Former Sun newspaper editor Kelvin MacKenzie publically decreed in 2011 that he would "shut all the journalism colleges down" and there was "no merit" in going to university if young people wanted to become a print journalist (MacKenzie, 2011). Instead he advocated getting a job on a local newspaper and learning from firsthand experience. What MacKenzie failed to acknowledge was that the era of the singular print journalist is over as today trainees must be accomplished in print, online and broadcast skills and furthermore journalism has become a graduate occupation and it is extremely difficult - although not impossible - to enter the industry without an undergraduate or postgraduate degree. Training no longer occurs systematically on the job as industry increasingly relies upon higher education to provide this service. Both of these factors have increased exponentially since MacKenzie made his remarks four years ago. Advice to aspiring journalists given by the Society of Editors (2014) makes it abundantly clear that the vast majority of new entrants to the occupation have degrees and an approved journalism qualification. Data from the Journalists at Work report (Spilsbury, 2013) indicates that 82 per cent of people working as journalists have a degree or higher level qualification compared to 38 per cent of all employment in the UK, making journalism a highly qualified occupation. Yet in 1968 less than 10 per cent of UK journalists were graduates (Boyd-Barrett, 1970).

The progression from school leaver to graduate job has occurred at a relatively steady pace in the UK over the last 40 years albeit at a slower rate than in America or parts of Western Europe. The first postgraduate journalism course in the UK was established at Cardiff University - formerly University College Cardiff - in 1970 (Evans, 2014) and more institutions followed suit, with postgraduate programmes in journalism being offered at 27 British universities by 2006 (Hanna and Sanders (2007). Initially the industry was sceptical of "out of touch" graduates, still

preferring younger recruits trained at vocational further education courses (Hanna and Sanders, 2007, p405). But this scepticism gradually subsided as the conversion of polytechnics to universities in the late 1980s saw competitive expansion in higher education and the emergence of single honour journalism undergraduate degrees. Between 1996 and 2005 the number of applicants applying for undergraduate or Higher National Diploma journalism programmes rose by 61 per cent (Hanna and Sanders, 2007) and according to the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service there are currently around 100 single and joint undergraduate degree courses involving journalism and 200 postgraduate (UCAS, 2015). Yet the expansion of journalism training into higher education was initially resisted by the leading accreditation body, the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ), as they feared such degrees would create an over-supply of journalism recruits to the market (Hanna and Sanders, 2007). But resistance eventually shifted to co-operation and today the NCTJ accredits around 40 undergraduate and postgraduate courses including BA Journalism, BA Broadcast Journalism, MA Magazine Journalism and MA Sports Journalism together with approximately 30 further education and fast track courses (NCTJa, 2015), accounting for 13 per cent of all journalism Bachelor and Masters degrees.

Founded in 1951, in response to criticisms levelled at the ethics and training of journalists in the Royal Commission on the Press, the NCTJ is the oldest and most dominant accreditation body in the UK. Now operating as a charity, the NCTJ is regulated by The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation and sets examinations for its Diploma and National Qualification in Journalism. In 2013 nearly two thirds of journalists held a journalism qualification, with the most common qualification being the NCTJ which accounted for 73 per cent of all journalism qualifications (Spilsbury, 2013) meaning that just under half of all working journalists had an

NCTJ qualification. Initially funded by industry and strongly supported by the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), the NCTJ controlled journalism training from the 1950s to the mid 1980s, setting caps on the number of training places in relation to vacancies in the regional press (Cole, 1998). But during the late 1980s and 1990s many newspaper groups withdrew from the NCTJ to set up their own training schemes or to transfer to the National Vocational Qualifications, which attracted public funding (NCTJb, 2015). Meanwhile higher education institutions encroached further into journalism education and "the whole area became a melting pot" (Cole, 1998, p6). During this period the Broadcast Journalism Training Council (BJTC) gained traction having previously operated as an advisory council for the training of radio journalists. In 1980 the BJTC became a formal partnership between universities and UK broadcasters such as BBC, ITV, ITN, Associated Press, Sky News, Channel 4 News and Reuters to accredit training schemes and maintain professional standards. Although it also holds charity status, in contrast to the NCTJ the BJTC does impose a single prescriptive syllabus on training providers and has no involvement in examinations but instead "encourages institutions to set examinations and assessment regimes which reflect current best practice and industry requirements" (BJTC, 2015). It currently accredits more than 50 higher education courses, 17 per cent of the 300 listed by UCAS.

Meanwhile the Professional Publishers Association (PPA), which evolved out of the historic Society of Weekly Newspapers and Periodical Proprietors, dating back to 1913, began accrediting higher education courses in 2011 (PPA, 2011) and currently accredits almost 20 undergraduate and postgraduate courses, representing seven per cent of all journalism higher education courses. The organisation, which represents 220 companies, ranging from consumer and customer magazines to business-to-business data and information providers is a forum and membership scheme for the magazine publishing industry.

Whilst it is possible for a course to be accredited by all three bodies most institutions choose the scheme which suits their specialism whether it be print, broadcast or magazine journalism (Frost, 2012). In such a busy and expansive marketplace accreditation is an attractive ‘added value’ for journalism degree applicants and as such is viewed by universities as a valuable marketing tool. As a result, currently a third of higher education journalism courses are accredited by at least one of the three bodies. The same value is also placed upon accreditation in university business schools where “those who are accredited see it as a valuable distinguishing mark for high quality provision and one which enhances demand and the fees that may be charged,” (Locke, 1999, p75). However there is no evidence in the UK to support the assumed applicant perception that accredited degrees are ‘superior’ to unaccredited degrees. Furthermore there is a significant lack of independent research into whether employers themselves value graduates from accredited courses over those from non-accredited courses. The emphasis on employability is a growing factor in UK universities with graduate employment rates featuring in league tables (The Guardian, 2015; The Complete University Guide, 2015) and the employability agenda creating a climate of "education for employment’s sake" (Sarson, 2013). But enhancing employability within journalism is dependent upon students being prepared with the relevant skills and expertise. With the growth of interest in digital and broadcast media, higher education institutions are faced with the question of whether or not accreditation schemes are relevant to employability and career progression and if indeed there is any correlation between accreditation and graduate employment rates. Some journalism scholars and educators (Heseltine, 2010; McNair, 2010) argue that student employability is no longer dependent on accreditation in an era of rapid globalisation and digitalisation and these bodies are no longer providing the necessary skills that industry requires. This research project therefore seeks to address this uncharted

field of inquiry via an exploratory study to identify the value of accreditation schemes to employers and the factors higher education journalism providers should assess when considering accreditation.

Value of accreditation

There is limited literature, globally, on any aspect of accreditation in higher education aside from a handful of papers on public relations (Sha, 2011), business (Locke, 1999) and general accreditation in American higher education institutions (Hall, 2012) which support the view that accreditation plays a significant role in maintaining professional quality and attracting students to courses. An extensive search uncovered only one piece of research relating to journalism, which involved a longitudinal analysis over three decades of the value of accredited and non accredited journalism and mass communication programmes in America (Seamon, 2010). The study found "no evidence" that accredited programmes were "strongly or clearly superior in major ways to unaccredited programmes" (p10) and that there were more similarities than differences between accredited and non-accredited journalism degrees. The body in question, the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (ACEJMC), requires institutions to fulfil nine specific criteria including diversity, scholarship and research, and fulfilling obligations to community and the public ensuring that accredited programmes meet "rigorous standards for professional education" (Seamon, 2010, p11). The liberal arts approach differs greatly from UK accreditation schemes which solely focus on practical skills and largely dismiss academic and scholarly activity. However similarities between USA and UK journalism accreditation can be identified as Seamon's research indicates that some institutions withdrew from the accreditation process due to the "inflexible rules regarding curriculum" (2010, p11), echoing the frustration felt by some UK universities (Heseltine, 2010; McNair, 2010). Four years later and Brian

McNair, former Professor of Journalism at Strathclyde University, still claims the NCTJ work against the core aims of universities, rub against intellectual and academic ethos and are "a bit of a scam" (McNair, personal communication, 2014).

Yet no independent, scholarly research on journalism accreditation has been conducted in the UK to date and the only benchmark is a 2011 survey of 104 newspaper editors, commissioned by the NCTJ, which found that 90 per cent viewed the NCTJ qualifications as "industry standard" (Gunter, 2011).

The problem of professionalisation

Despite UK accreditation bodies attempts to formalise journalism training there is no set entry requirement into the occupation and modes of entry vary enormously. Applicants can gain their first job in journalism via work experience, formal training schemes, freelancing or directly with no prior experience (Spilsbury, 2013). The legitimacy of journalism degrees as entry into the 'profession' is therefore questionable when compared to disciplines such as law, medicine and engineering. The Quality Assurance Agency which monitors standards in higher education has no benchmark outline for journalism and instead the subject falls under communication, media, film and cultural studies, in part due to the fact that it is a historically undefined activity which bridges multiple classifications including profession, craft, industry, literary genre, culture, social practice, community and ideology (Evans, 2014). Its ambiguous nature means that journalism cannot be clearly defined as a complete profession but nonetheless it has been moving towards professionalisation in the past 40 years with the development of professional ideology including objectivity, integrity, public service, professional institutions and codes of practice (Nygren, 2011) and its progression from school leaver to graduate occupation. Indeed raising journalism

from a trade to a learned profession has been a topic of debate in the UK for more than a century (Christian, 1980) and similar arguments have been held across the Atlantic since editor Joseph Pulitzer gifted \$2 million to Columbia University in 1903 to set up the world's first Graduate School of Journalism (Mensing, 2011). Subsequently in 1908 The Washington Post proposed that:

"Today the cowled doctor of law sits in the front row of fame, the distinguished representative of a most honored profession. And it is not unreasonable to fancy that in the fullness of time our doctor of the science of journalism will sit on his right hand and share with him all of the rights, privileges, and honours which the distinction affords," (The Washington Post, 1908).

But journalists and scholars alike (Donsbach, 2014; Nygren, 2011; Wilson, 1995; Boyd-Barrett, 1970) still remain resistant to professionalisation due to the potential legal restrictions and implications on the freedom of speech which could "undermine the constitutional role journalists play as the watchdog of government" (Wilson, 1995, p2).

As previously discussed, the development of journalism as a graduate occupation - albeit not a graduate profession - is largely due to the expansion of journalism education in postgraduate and more recently, undergraduate, programmes. But a paradox exists within higher education as the traditional consensus is that journalism education should be focused on practical vocational skills including shorthand, news gathering and news writing, as legitimised by the accreditation bodies, and yet it is situated within an academic environment, whose core business is research. The focus of this education is occupation socialisation and "training students to work in professional news organisations" (Mensing, 2011) rather than enabling graduates to reflect upon their role in

society and question the world in which they operate. Burgh (2003) further argues that journalism should be regarded as a serious academic discipline and not simply vocational training and that the purpose of a degree "is not to make people adequate employees but thoughtful citizens and potential contributors to the intellectual and cultural life of society" (p98). The question then becomes as to whether such an education is possible within a restrictive, skills-led accreditation framework and employment-focused higher education marketplace.

However, rather than analyse the vocational versus educational content of journalism degree programmes which is another legitimate field of inquiry, this research sets out to explore the employability agenda and the correlation between employment and accreditation. In my career as a journalism educator (and former NCTJ qualified journalist) I have often heard the claim from colleagues at various institutions that employers prefer, or prioritise, graduates from accredited courses however this is entirely based on anecdotal evidence. This project is the first step towards systematically addressing those claims by conducting research with journalism employers involved directly with recruitment.

Methods

This study was conducted on an exploratory basis via qualitative interviews to make initial steps into the uncharted territory of accreditation. Purposive and convenience sampling was used to select 14 interviewees who represented the breadth of the industry including newspapers, magazines, online publishers, radio broadcasters and television broadcasters from community, local, regional and national news organisations. The sample included both public service broadcasters and commercial media companies. The full list of organisations can be found in

Appendix 1. Interviewees were selected on the basis that they were directly involved in recruitment, in particular, entry level. The anonymous sample was therefore largely made up of editors (11 in total) with the remaining three interviewees holding the position of deputy editor, department editor or news editor. Each interview was conducted via telephone, bar one which was held in person, using a structured interview incorporating qualitative and quantitative questions. The questions were developed following consultation with members of the cross-disciplinary Sheffield Hallam University C3RI Research Seminar group who made recommendations on how to develop the scope of the original questions.

The purpose of the interview was to explore, if and how, subjects differentiated between skills and training, their own training and entry into journalism, their awareness of accreditation bodies, the significance of accreditation in the recruitment process and their views on the value of accreditation bodies. Further questions were used to explore their views on graduate and non-graduate candidates.

Findings

Despite the prevalence of discussion surrounding journalism accreditation in higher education and a third of courses being accredited, results from this exploratory study indicate that accreditation is not a key factor in the recruitment of entry level journalists. However some journalism training - accredited or otherwise - is desirable although not always essential.

Skills and training

The 14 subjects were each asked an opening question about the types of skills they were looking for when recruiting an entry level journalist. The skills were self selected rather than being chosen from a list and therefore were open to interpretation of the word 'skill'. This technique

was used to explore their understanding of the word skill and also to identify the basic core job requirements, without leading interviewees to directly relate these to training or accreditation. Respondents were able to list as many skills as they deemed appropriate. The two most popular skills were writing skills and digital skills with two thirds of the subjects listing both of these indicating that they now hold equal weight in the newsroom. Technological advancements mean that generally speaking employers expect new recruits to be digitally literate but the traditional skill of writing a news story - even for broadcasters - remains equally important and employees are expected to have both sets of skills. However in some areas digital and social media skills are becoming more significant with one news website editor saying:

We are looking for someone who is good on the internet, it's as simple as that...We don't look that much at CVs. If you are not active on Twitter you are definitely not getting a job with us.

Five respondents also referred to experience of working in a newsroom and finding a story, but only four mentioned shorthand, three referred to media law, two stated public affairs and two asked for subbing skills. One newspaper editor discussed the decline in public affairs as an essential skill:

In terms of law and public affairs I would say that law is definitely more important. You would expect them to be competent and at least understand the warning signs if nothing else especially now with online there is a lot more publishing direct without any checks...Then public affairs is at the bottom of the pack to be honest. A basic understanding of how councils operate is useful and local government but to be honest with you, apart from the fact it is part of the prelim NCTJ qualification as a whole, we

wouldn't place that much important on that, that going to council two or three times wouldn't solve.

Other 'skills' that received responses from four or less people included: ethics, ideas, attitude, communication, social media (rather than more generic digital skills), driving traffic and an interest in current affairs. Aside from the skill of writing a news story the other traditional skills of media law, public affairs, shorthand and subbing, which are examined by the NCTJ, were not prevalent in the responses showing a shift away from these core skills.

The second question focused on training rather than skills and asked what training employers would expect new recruits to have. There was some overlap here with the first question as many respondents did not distinguish between skills and training. Nine respondents said they would expect entry level journalists to have some form of journalism specific training whether it be higher education, further education, fast track or even self-taught. Only two respondents specifically referred to accredited training (one NCTJ and one BJTC) and three referred to a journalism undergraduate or postgraduate degree although did not specify that it had to be accredited. A third of respondents said they were specifically looking for evidence of media law training, four referred to shorthand and five referred to work experience as a form of essential training. One national broadcaster explained the need for a balance of training and experience:

On the job experience is really important. Too many people are going straight from journalism courses into an air conditioned newsroom and they never knock on someone's door the day after their son was killed. I think you need the two together. A journalism course or training without experience of gathering stories in a local area is not enough but equally experience without the bedrock of journalism training is quite tricky.

These responses suggest that although journalism training is advantageous, accredited training or higher education training is not essential or at the forefront of employers minds.

Interviewees were next asked whether they would expect the same level of skills and training from freelancers and the overwhelming response was yes, with half saying they would expect higher skill levels from freelancers than they would from entry level recruits. One national broadcaster said: "The same rules apply for freelancers, even more so. They need evidence that they have practically done the job. You wouldn't want a freelancer who can't write good, clean, accurate copy."

Shift in training expectation

Each interviewee was asked about their own training and entry into journalism to identify how this process may have changed over time but also whether it had any bearing on their own recruitment selection process. As Figure 1 reveals the respondents had a mixture of pathways into the occupation with five being indentured to local newspapers via the previous NCTJ training scheme, three with a postgraduate qualification in journalism, two accepted onto industry training schemes and perhaps more significantly, four with no training at all, including one who had entered the industry in the last decade, who stated "I have been doing journalism for 10 years, I have never felt the need to get a formal qualification in it" and another who argued "I haven't got any formal journalism qualification. I have 20 years experience". This reflects the "melting pot" of training and entry into journalism that has developed over the past 40 years " (Cole, 1998, p6).

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Despite the fact that more than two thirds of respondents had completed journalism training themselves, half said they would employ someone today with no training at all. This is an unexpected finding due to the reduction of in-house training schemes but respondents argued that there were many different ways for candidates to demonstrate their skills and gain experience which would not have been possible in the past, when a training certificate was more relied upon. One newspaper editor described the recruitment of a recent reporter:

One of the digital trainees we recently recruited hadn't even got A levels, didn't go to university, hadn't trained with NCTJ or anybody else, but she could demonstrate in the way the application was written, it was funny, it was clever. She had done lots of things, a blog, digital journalism, got herself a job with an online publication and was absolutely exceptional and had no qualifications at all.

But the other half of the respondents disagreed with this viewpoint and said taking on someone with no training was too risky and they could not provide the training to make them trustworthy. One digital magazine editor said taking on someone with no training would be "far too much work" and added:

I would need them to jump in fairly quickly. It is very risky taking on someone with no training and there is an awful lot to teach them even with people who have done courses if they are new to work they still have to pick up a lot.

These results show an ambiguous picture over the importance of training, not least accredited training, but do emphasise once more the increasing significance given to work experience and candidates demonstrating that they have conducted real life journalism rather than simply carrying out training exercises.

Significance of accreditation

A significant proportion of the employer interviews involved questions surrounding journalism accreditation and higher education courses. Interviewees were asked which journalism accreditation bodies they were aware of, if any, and asked to name them. Only two respondents were unaware of any bodies and these were people representing non-traditional news / magazine websites who had no journalism training and would be better categorised as entrepreneurs. The other 12 respondents all named the NCTJ, whilst five also identified the BJTC and three the PPA. Three of those that did identify the BJTC were not clear of its exact name or acronym and referred to it as the “broadcast equivalent of the BJTC”, “BAJ” or “NCTJB”. Only one respondent was able to name all three accreditation bodies and this was a broadcaster who had been trained via an NCTJ newspaper indenture. These findings indicate that the NCTJ is the market leader in terms of accreditation penetration and visibility which is not unexpected given it is the longest standing training body and traditionally was the entry route into journalism. Its ability to adapt to a competitive training market has enabled it to maintain its market dominance and presence in both education and industry. Whilst the NCTJ is recognised by employers at print, broadcast and online platforms, the BJTC remains confined to the vestiges of broadcast media and the PPA has penetrated very little of the non-magazine market. Indeed the BJTC and PPA operate as niche accreditors and unlike the NCTJ which has incorporated magazine, broadcast and online modules, are content to represent their platforms rather than market themselves as holistic journalism training providers.

Although the majority of interview respondents could name at least one accreditation body their knowledge of the organisations was largely limited. Two respondents referred to undergraduate courses which they had relationships with under the assumption that these were accredited when

in fact they were not. A quarter of respondents said they were not directly involved in keeping track of accreditation and this was dealt with by a central human resources or placements department. Three respondents referred to the setting of exams but one of these wrongly stated that the BCTJ set exams as well as the NCTJ. Half of the respondents referred in general terms to the way in which accreditation bodies accredit courses, set a benchmark and inspect standards and five respondents admitted that they had little or no knowledge of what the bodies were responsible for. One newspaper editor appeared to be unaware of the NCTJ's expansion into multiplatform training:

I know the NCTJ have historically always been plugged into traditional media for accreditation and qualifications and in terms of colleges and universities as well. They have a responsible for the training levels of students and reporters becoming recognised senior reporters. The way they set exams and keep abreast of that situation but that is broadly it. Certainly for print I don't know if they deal with magazines or any broadcast but I suspect not but I don't know, I might be wrong. I would be surprised if they were involved in accreditation outside that sphere like start up websites or digital orientated businesses that would class themselves as journalism or employing journalists.

The lack of detailed knowledge about the roles and responsibilities of the accreditation bodies may go some way towards explaining why eight employers stated that accreditation was not part of the recruitment selection process and all but one said attainment of the NCTJ diploma was not a requirement. The one respondent - representing the regional press - clearly indicated that NCTJ accreditation and NCTJ diploma attainment was part of the candidate selection process, and the remaining five respondents said accreditation was a factor for consideration but not a

priority, a “desirable rather than an essential” and “part of the package rather than something we actively look for”. And even the regional press employer said there were exceptions to the rule:

We would specify that we would expect to be interviewing people who had their NCTJ prelims preferably 100 wpm shorthand and when we do the initial sieve of applicants that would be the first thing we would do in terms of putting a yes and no pile together. Equally if we are aware of someone who has been in with us on work experience and we think they have got talent and we like them and we think they would fit in the newsroom and depending on where they are at and what the job is we would probably prioritise that above the qualifications. But we would still expect them to be on route to those qualifications or we would push them towards them.

Other respondents did not appear to differentiate between a journalism degree and an accredited degree, with one magazine editor stating: “We would ask for a journalism qualification either NCTJ or university equivalent.” It is also worth noting that this employer was showing a preference for the traditional NCTJ accreditation route rather than the magazine specific PPA scheme. Again the recurring theme was that candidates should be able to demonstrate that they had experience in the field above all else. One national broadcaster explained:

Rather than a first class honours from a BJTC course I would be more impressed with someone who has written a blog or has 10,000 Twitter followers or runs their own website or YouTube channel and I can look and think yes, that is good stuff, they’re a good journalist.

Considering that attending an accredited course or attaining an NCTJ journalism diploma is not deemed essential criteria for entry level job applications it is interesting to note that half of

respondents still felt that accreditation bodies had a valuable role to play, in particular in preparing students for the working news room and giving them a “readiness to jump into things”. Two interviewees said they valued accreditation bodies immensely with one broadcaster acknowledging: “We rely on them to set the bar. We rely on them that their students can deliver the business for us. Without that we would be lost a little bit”. Two others respondents referred to accreditation bodies as a safety net albeit with caveats as one print employer explained: “It is helpful but it is by no means an acid test of whether someone is going to be a good reporter. It is a bit of a safety blanket.”

Attaining 100 words per minute shorthand, an NCTJ diploma requirement, was raised, unprompted, by two interviewees - print and broadcast - who argued that this was an effective way of “filtering out people who are really committed” and measuring a candidate’s “application rather than intelligence”.

The continued relevance of accreditation bodies and their ability to meet rapid changes in the industry formed the last section of the interview, with six respondents stating that these bodies remained relevant, but five stating that they did not know. Three interviewees suggested that the bodies needed to improve their digital content to remain up to date. These results depict a contradictory picture about the value and relevance of such bodies which is often overshadowed by the marketing value attributed by higher education institutions.

The value of a degree

Although this research project was focused on the value of journalism accreditation bodies such a study could not be conducted in a vacuum and as such the context of higher education was also analysed. Interviewees were therefore asked whether there were any significant differences

between candidates with journalism training from outside higher education such as further education or fast track courses and those with undergraduate or postgraduate journalism degrees. For many lecturers, particularly former practitioners, journalism is a practical skill, rather than an academic discipline and as such sits awkwardly and somewhat ambiguously in higher education. This is reflected in industry where experience and skills are given preference over qualifications and academic achievement. The subjects in this research were of a similar opinion and expressed lukewarm reception to the suggestion that journalism degrees provided something fast track or further education courses could not. Four respondents said there was no difference, or they did not know if there was any difference between higher education journalism courses and non-university courses. One magazine employer believed training was far more important than a degree and two other respondents went further and said a degree in journalism was a hindrance with one national employer reasoning that “if you limit the selection process to someone who has all the certificates you are not necessarily going to get all the best people”. The remaining interviewees focused on the practical skills and experience that were catered for within degrees rather than academic attributes such as critical thinking, research and scholarship. However half of the respondents did view journalism degrees as offering added value and attributes such as "greater confidence", a "readiness for work" and "deeper knowledge of the subject" with four employers recognising that the prevalence of degrees amongst the population meant it was becoming a minimum requirement by default. As one broadcaster reflected: "It is not necessary to have a degree to be a journalist but it is necessary to have a degree to get into journalism. Everybody has got a degree." Indeed due to the saturation of the journalism degree market, five interviewees commented that greater social diversity was needed in the newsroom rather than

more graduates and the industry should be encouraging applications from "local lads and lasses" and those with a "rawness" to prevent journalism becoming an "elitist profession".

Discussion

These exploratory findings give a snapshot of the changing pathways into journalism in the digital age. Despite the rhetoric often presented by journalism lecturers, many of who are former print journalists themselves, entry into the occupation is no longer a singular route via the regional press and graduates today are faced with a diverse range of occupation entry points and multiplatform opportunities.

Although the research is based on a relatively minute sample the findings are not insignificant as patterns can be identified across all sectors of the industry. Skills based training of some variety which prepares students for work in a news room is the most attractive package that graduates can present to employers when seeking employment. This supports the employability agenda being implemented by universities and measured in league tables (The Guardian, 2015; The Complete University Guide, 2015) and continues the tradition of journalism education as a form of socialisation to the occupation (Mensing, 2011), with employers longing for recruits who are ready to work and can fit into the existing newsroom structures, norms and practices. This perpetuates the longstanding debate, which has existed since the creation of UK journalism degrees in 1970 over the legitimacy of journalism as an academic discipline or indeed as an entry requirement into an industry which is so ambiguously defined. This raises further questions about whether journalism educators should be simply be creating carbon copies of existing journalists, with a standard set of skills required by current employers, or encouraging greater

academic development to produce critically thinking graduates who can challenge existing journalistic norms.

However the right balance needs to be found and skills will always be integral to journalism education even as educators develop further scholarship alongside this. But as this research indicates, this core skill set is changing and is now largely comprised of two key elements - representing the past and future - the skills of finding and writing a story together with intermediate digital literacy. This then brings into question the continued relevance of accreditation bodies, particularly the NCTJ with its core syllabus, which focus more on traditional skills of shorthand, media law and public affairs. Indeed the findings of this project indicate that applicants are much better able to demonstrate these skills through their own extra-curricular activities such as work experience, producing a multimedia blog and creating a Twitter following than by showing up to an interview and producing an accredited degree or NCTJ diploma certificate. However it must be acknowledged that in many, if not most cases, the skills, opportunities and experience developed on their degree has encouraged and enabled applicants to undertake such extra-curricular activity and furthermore some may argue that this is more prevalent on accredited courses, where such activity is expected to achieve accreditation.

This project set out to identify the value of accreditation to industry employers in light of a lack of independent research in this field and the findings appear to uphold the conclusion of Seamon's research (2010) which indicates that there is no evidence that accredited courses are superior in some way, from an employer perspective at least. Employers prefer applicants to have some form of journalism training, but since such training is ubiquitous and employers find it difficult to differentiate between accredited and non-accredited courses, and to a certain extent

between higher and further education, they rely upon applicants to demonstrate their skills through their online portfolios and via selection days and interviews.

Although this study raises initial questions about the continued value and relevance of journalism accreditation the results must be evaluated with caution due to two key factors. The study was exploratory in nature and only involved a small sample of employers and therefore future research should seek to engage a more substantive quantitative sample. Secondly the research was only focused on the perspective of employers and the employability agenda of universities rather than the marketing agenda. Further study is needed to understand both the value of accreditation to journalism students themselves and also the correlation between accreditation and the recruitment of students onto accredited and non-accredited degrees.

Conclusion

It appears that by default rather than design that journalism has become a graduate occupation despite the fact that it is not a selection requirement by employers. Indeed the training of journalists appears to be in flux once more as employers are more open to diverse candidates including those who are self taught and news organisations are making attempts to encourage non-graduates to enter the profession. Whilst in the latter half of the 20th century journalism training shifted from industry to university there now appears to be a gradually emerging trend whereby entry level applicants are being expected to self demonstrate their skills using online digital tools. This raises questions not only about the value and relevance of accreditation but also the role of educators in a world where anyone can practice journalism online.

Funding

The author is grateful to the Association for Journalism Education for awarding this project an annual research grant.

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Appendix 1

Interviewees' media organisations

About My Area

BBC (individuals from online, radio and television, regional and national)

BuzzFeed

ITN News

Johnston Press

My Student Style

Press Association

Progressive Media Group

Regional Magazine Company

Sky Sports News

Slimming World

The Guardian

Figure 1: Training of employer

