

Conference 2002: Professional Placement

Professional Placement – A Tasmanian Experience

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A recent study by Dr Miriam Weisz at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University in Melbourne, found that graduates, employers and governments benefit from university courses that have a compulsory work component (1). The study compared the employment and academic outcomes of students in three groups: cooperative-education graduates who had studied economics and finance at RMIT, graduates with similar degrees from other universities who had worked over summer as part of their course, and those with similar degrees who had no work experience related to their course. Dr Weisz found that students benefited from cooperative education in several ways, including improved results and better employment outcomes." Ninety per cent were working within a month of looking for a job (with 60 per cent remaining with their employers), compared with 54% of those who had worked over summer, and only 19% of those without relevant work experience.

There is a correlation between Dr Weisz's study with RMIT economics and finance students and University of Tasmania journalism placement students. The employment outcome for those journalism students who have undertaken the Professional Placement Unit has been better significantly better than those graduates who did not. This paper will examine this outcome and examine the unique Tasmanian experience offered by the Professional Placement Unit.

The Journalism Professional Placement Unit is now a third-year unit offered as part of the Journalism and Media Studies Major. The aim of the unit is to place students in the workplace for a specified period of time (10 full days) to work as trainee journalists and to be involved in the day-to-day production of news or public relations. Emphasis is placed on the student's ability to work within the "real world" while being able to make theoretical observations of the work place while they are still under the pedagogical umbrella of a tertiary institution. Students are given the opportunity not only to see how the theory they have learnt translates into the practical working world, but also to show their level of competence as trainee journalists or public relations practitioners.

The unit is currently run in both semesters – although from 2004 the unit will only be offered in second semester. At present students can count both Placement units towards a journalism major. The quota is twenty students in each semester, although there is some flexibility depending upon placement providers. I have placed up to 25 students in a semester. Students must have obtained a credit or above in either television, feature writing, radio or public communications to be able to be placed. As well as being placed for 10 days, spread over the semester, students are required to attend a weekly one-hour lecture and a weekly one-hour seminar. This is an important aspect of the unit and keeps the students in touch with the theoretical issues of journalism and public relations.

The assessment for the unit is both internal and external. The internal assessment is: an oral presentation (10%), a written report of 1,500-2,000 (30%) which must be a reflective piece covering the student's placement experience in terms of the theoretical units they have studied (in particular ethics); the placement supervisor's report (30%), which includes a written assessment and a generic skills assessment; a daily placement diary (10%) and a portfolio of work (20%).

Initially the Tasmanian media and communications industry was unsure of the placement program, but after extensive consultation and reassurance that Professional Placement was markedly different to work experience, the industry embraced the concept and is now keen to place students.

The focus of this paper is the experiences of Placement students in news journalism placements. Ten placements are offered each semester in public relations at a range of organizations, from political to community and government departments but these placements are not the subject of this paper.

Tasmania is a unique environment in which to place university journalism students. It is a small island state with a population of 500,000, its own state government and the necessary infrastructure – a state parliament, government bureaucracy etc as well as federal government offices and bureaucracy. With a population of almost 200,000 the capital city, Hobart, has the feel of a big country city rather than a teeming capital city metropolis.

Tasmania has long been regarded nationally and internationally as an excellent breeding ground for journalists. Tasmanian journalists of recent years who have had success interstate and overseas are:

- Neil Kearney, National 9's A Current Affair program.
- Tom O'Byrne, ABC Beijing correspondent.
- Tim Lester ABC European and now North American Correspondent.
- Mark Burrows, National Nine News Chief North American Correspondent.
- Chris Clarke, ABC Middle East correspondent
- Tony Easley, ABC National News presenter.
- Sue Downie, ABC South-East Asian Correspondent.
- Christopher Kremmer, former ABC European correspondent, now senior international correspondent for Fairfax.
- Michael Gleeson, former Washington Correspondent.
- Steve Harris, former Editor in Chief The Age and Editor in Chief at The Herald and Weekly Times.
- Charles Woolley, national current affairs program, Sixty Minutes.
- Michael Stephens, Editor Sunday Canberra Times.
- Scott White, CNN, London.
- There is also a collective of ex-WIN/ABC and Southern Cross journalists now working as producers overseas, some in Asia but mainly in the UK for B-Sky-B or CNN.

Part of the reason for this success is the breadth of experience a Tasmanian-trained journalist gains from the early stages of their cadetship. A journalist in Tasmania has the opportunity to work across all disciplines including government, parliament, courts, police, and union rounds, general news and also in feature writing.

Placement students in Tasmania have the opportunity to produce news stories for capital city news organizations as well as regional news groups. Students work as "temporary cadets" under a supervisor during their placement. Students have the opportunity to find their own stories and are also given stories by the Chief of Staff as a cadet journalist.

Students and placement providers must sign a written contract at the beginning of their placement which includes the wording:

News Organisations in Tasmania

Tasmania has three major regional daily newspapers: The Mercury in Hobart, the capital city, The Examiner in Launceston and The Advocate in Burnie.

The Advocate newspaper is a Tasmanian-owned regional daily with its head office in the port city of Burnie on Tasmania's North West Coast. It has a daily readership of 25,246. It has newsrooms in Burnie, Devonport, Launceston and Hobart.

(Students have the opportunity to be placed in the main newsroom in Devonport or in the Hobart newsroom. The Advocate also publishes two local newspapers in Devonport and Burnie and several country newspapers.)

The Examiner newspaper is a Tasmanian-owned daily newspaper with its head office in Launceston, the Northern capital of Tasmania. Its daily Monday to Saturday circulation is 36,241. The Examiner employs more than 40 news journalists not including sub-editors. The Sunday Examiner has a circulation of 41,777. The Examiner also publishes several rural newspapers.

The Mercury newspaper is a Murdoch-owned newspaper and is Tasmania's only capital city (Hobart) daily newspaper. It has a daily Monday to Saturday circulation of 54,000 a Saturday circulation of 64,732. The Sunday newspaper, the Sunday Tasmanian, has a circulation of 58,000. The Mercury employs more than 50

news journalists. Placement students are placed either in the Hobart office with the Sunday Tasmanian or in The Mercury newsroom.

(The Mercury has offices in all regional centres of Tasmania. The Mercury also publishes the state-wide rural newspaper, Tasmanian Country and the regional newspaper The Derwent Valley Gazette.)

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation has offices in all Australian capital cities and regional centres around Australia. The national broadcaster has its Tasmanian broadcasting centre in Hobart where 24 journalists are employed in the newsroom as well as subeditors and producers. Journalists write scripts for both television and radio news bulletins. The ABC also has broadcasting centres in Launceston and Burnie. Placement students are placed in the Hobart newsrooms.

Tasmania has two commercial television stations - TNT 9 Southern Cross and WIN Television Tasmania. WIN Television is part of Australia's major regional commercial broadcaster. Both stations have offices in Hobart and Launceston. Although WIN is historically the southern station and Southern Cross the Northern Station, both stations broadcast state-wide and have newsrooms in both Launceston and Hobart. Placement students are placed in both the Hobart and Launceston offices of WIN and Southern Cross. Southern Cross produces a half-hour northern and southern news bulletin nightly. WIN produces a one-hour bulletin - a half hour of Tasmanian news and a half hour of national/Tasmanian news.

This past semester through a partnership with Arts Tasmania, the national Australia Council (a national arts funding body), The Mercury and the University of Tasmania four students were placed with a mentor (a working arts journalists and subeditor) to produce all of the editorial for three editions of artsprint, a four-page arts insert which was placed in the Tuesday Mercury. This partnership has gained a great deal of interest nationally.

Not all students have had work published or broadcast while on placement but the majority do. The best students are able to develop an impressive portfolio of work by the end of their placement, while others will have draft stories for their portfolio. Likewise, television placement students are able to come away with a series of tapes of their work. Several of the television students, particularly those placed with WIN television, have had stories broadcast. The opportunity to create an impressive portfolio is one of the most important aspects for students when applying for employment after graduation. "I now have a substantial portfolio of work," one of last year's students wrote (2). Although I was never under great pressure my placement threw me in the deep end a little and this enabled me to learn from my own experiences rather than from observing other people".

Ethics:

The Professional Placement unit requires that students not only observe ethical issues which may arise during their placement, but that they also analyse these issues in a written report. The Journalism Ethics Unit is now a compulsory unit in the journalism major.

The Professional Placement unit was recently singled in the University's Generic Attributes study as an exemplary example of the application of social responsibility. Angela Rosier wrote in her case study:

The unit covers this attribute through encouraging students to act ethically with integrity and social responsibility. They are constantly reminded of the social and ethical implications of their actions as journalists. Students are made aware of access and equity principles in the media arena and in the law. Information provided to students states that: 'Students engage critically with a range of issues confronting the professional journalist, including intellectual, ethical, legal and political considerations and the growth of the information society' . (3)

David Conoly argues that what is ethical is very much in the eyes of the beholder and that journalists "must make decisions in pressured circumstances, which do not lend themselves to considered philosophical thought. Reporters must assess various shades of grey" (4). Many students have encountered "shades of grey" during their placement. But not all students fully understand the meaning of ethical issues or the nature of a news bulletin.

Comments range from: "With Southern Cross being a commercial station, their stories are not hard hitting and in depth, therefore legal issues hardly ever arise, nor does the question of ethics" (5) to: "A difference between theory and practice in most occupations provides for conflict, and the journalistic profession provides no exception" (6) and: "Throughout my years as a Journalism undergraduate, the AJA Code of Ethics has been bandied about on a regular basis by lecturers and to most students they seems to be based on common sense values. However, those guidelines suddenly become less tangible when the boundaries between the media and the "outside world" become quite blurred." (7)

A television placement student said that while she was placed at the commercial station she was ... able to recognise how years of journalistic theory applied to the day to day reality of being a journalist. Additionally I was able to assess and monitor ethical situations objectively. This objectivity enabled me to determine how situations should have been dealt with on a sound ethical basis. Most importantly, I was able to expand (on) my broadcast skills within a pressured work environment. If not for this opportunity I would still be ignorant about a broadcast journalist's role in both the newsroom and in society. (8)

Another student at a commercial television station noticed the MEAA code of ethics poster on the wall of the news room but was told by a senior journalist that ethics was a "matter of personal choice and common sense". The student related how a senior journalist told her that a journalist should ... do whatever they felt comfortable with and this would obviously differ between individuals. She also noted though that she had never been placed in a situation by an employer where she had felt uncomfortable with the assigned task and refused to comply. Further ... she held that journalistic (sic) courses that concentrated on ethics and theory were a waste of time when a person could easily learn these things first hand on the job . (9)

The student assured me that she thought it was still "a good idea" to give students a background in ethics. Otherwise more costly mistakes could be made in the industry further down the track. I do think, however, that no matter how practical a journalism course aims to be, it can never replace the hand-on experience (I have experienced) of being placed in a real professional environment.

Another student working on a regional newspaper observed:

In one story I wrote I got a surprise to find whilst reading the paper (the next day) that a quote had been added in by a sports journalist even though he was not present when the interview took place.

On another occasion the student gathered quotes for the sports journalist but noticed him adjusting some of the words as he wrote them in. I questioned him over whether he should be doing it and his reply was that half the time the person interviewed couldn't really remember what they said anyway. I didn't pursue the issue with him any further. (10)

In the two years that this unit has been running there have been a number of occasions when students have been faced with a fatality, but the experience of one student was particularly challenging. The female student, aged 20, was placed at The Advocate in Burnie. While out on a job with a photographer a call came through about a house fire and as they were only a short distance from the house and the photographer did not hesitate to drive there. As it turned out the photographer and the young female student were the first on the scene and arrived to hear the occupant, who was trapped in his burning house, crying out for help. The photographer tried to reach the occupant (a wheel-chair-bound-man) but was unable to do so. His badly burned pet cat was rescued by the student, but died at the scene. There was little the photographer or student could do for the trapped occupant but stand and listen to the man's frantic cries as the fire claimed his life.

The photographer was treated for minor burns and smoke inhalation. The student was sent for counselling when she arrived back at The Advocate office. The following day when the adrenalin rush had dissipated, she became upset during the work placement and was sent home. The student remained at her placement for the rest of the week before returning to Hobart and to the University. I again encouraged her to use the University's counselling service, which she did. Although naturally upset by the incident, she was able to put it into perspective and in time accepted that it was an aspect, albeit a very unpleasant one, of news journalism.

What do students gain from the experience?

A student who was placed with WIN commented: "Most importantly I was able to expand on my broadcast skills within a pressured work environment" (Amy Hills), while another student placed at Southern Cross

Television said: "I guess I was also lucky that such a big story broke." (11)

The student was placed at Southern Cross television during the week that a big break came in a high-profile murder investigation. She went with reporters to the site where clothes were found and was on site when a breakthrough was made. She followed the story through the following day when the body was found and had the opportunity to do stand-up pieces and put a script and voice-over together and attended several police press conferences. Although her work did not go to air she assisted in gathering information and writing voice overs. "There were only two journalists in the office (the day the breakthrough was made) so I was allowed to cover it. It's good to know that they trust you enough to do this."

A senior journalist told this student: "It's better to hassle and be a pain than not at all. It's important for people to see how keen I am and that I'm willing to do things. She said that I'd get more of a chance down here than I would on the mainland."

An Advocate Placement student had the opportunity to work on the features pages: "About half way through my week at The Advocate I was given sole responsibility of the "Weekend Extra History Page". I had to select a family history, type it up and edit it to about half of its original length. I then had to arrange for a photograph to accompany the story." (12)

Another Advocate student found that "one of the best things about working with a senior sport's journalist was that he was not afraid to give me a chance. He would just give me a name and a phone number, a brief description of the situation and point me in the direction of a computer and a phone and I found that this, combined with asking a lot of questions, was the best way to learn the trade" . (13)

Placement students have had prominent news stories published in all three newspapers. Tasmania's largest newspaper, The Mercury, has also given placement students the opportunity to have their feature stories published in the Sunday newspaper Sunday Tasmanian. They have also had stories broadcast and televised.(Show stories.)

Outcomes:

The Advocate newspaper is particularly supportive of the Placement Unit. Sean Ford, Chief of Staff says: We have picked up some excellent students through the University of Tasmania in recent years. They have come into journalism with impressive aptitude and attitudes. They may not have the hard-won general knowledge of experienced reporters, but they have clearly been fast-tracked in the analytical and mental skills which are so important in this industry and can take years to develop for people coming into the field from other backgrounds.

On the subject of placements in non-metropolitan areas, I believe there are many advantages for the students. Often in the case of our recruits from uni, they are returning home. Also, they get a very well-rounded and accelerated experience of many aspects of newspaper work during a timeframe which may see them progressing much more slowly at bigger operations, hence metro papers' keenness to poach journo's from regional newspaper operations, and also their willingness to consider job applicants with such a background.

In terms of the professional placement unit, I think it works well as it gives the students a chance to assess whether this is the right sort of work for them and gives the employer the chance to assess the students' capabilities, as the employer is always on the lookout for potential recruits when space becomes available. We have earmarked several professional placement students from the uni as potential future employees and have employed several of those, with hopefully some more in the pipeline. Applicants still have to go through our interview process, but it is reassuring when recruiting to have a first hand idea of a person's potential. Everyone's reference looks good and most people can talk a good talk, but the truth usually comes out in professional placement. (14)

Dr Weisz's experience of employment outcomes for economic and finance students with work experience is similar to the employment outcomes for journalism students who undertake the Professional Placement unit. Only three journalism graduates from the University have found employment in the media industry without completing the placement unit. On the other hand 22 students who have undertaken the placement unit have gained work in the media industry in Tasmania or interstate – and this in a contracting media jobs market in a small Australian State with a population of half a million. This number is set to rise with the new group of graduates entering the workforce.

Jane Bestwick and Alistair Nicholson both gained employment as cadet journalists at WIN Television – Alistair as a sports journalist and presenter and Jane as a general and sports journalist and presenter. Both front the Six O'clock news bulletin as sports presenters. (Show video.)

- Six students have gained cadetships at The Advocate directly from their placement experience.
- Four students have gained employment at The Mercury, two directly from the Professional Placement unit.
- One student has gained employment at The Examiner and another was offered a position but refused.
- One student has gained a traineeship at the ABC.
- One student gained employment in PR direct from her placement experience and has since moved to a regional daily in Queensland.

Seven students have gained employment in the public relations industry directly as a result of their placement experience.

And what happened to the Placement student who experienced the fire fatality? After graduating Shae Johnston was offered, and accepted, a position as a cadet journalist at The Advocate. She is now, a year on, a graded features writer for that newspaper. As I said journalists are fast-tracked in Tasmania. I will close with the words of another student, who, just last week was on the short list for the one prestigious ABC cadetship in Tasmania.

Although I have experienced stressful and trying times, I have come so far in my abilities and strengths as a journalist. A student can never really understand the work of a journalist until he or she experiences being one first hand. It is only then that all the theory and technical knowledge learnt in the classroom can be applied and moulded to the practical situation. The ethical discussions I had at University helped me to recognise questionable situations and to determine how they should have been dealt with. The nurturing of my skills, field related knowledge and attitude was invaluable". (15)

Footnotes

1. "Theory Meets Practice", Margaret Cook, The Age Education Guide, May 29, 2002.
2. Alistair Nicholson, October, 2001.
3. Social Responsibility for Journalism Students", Case Studies: Generic Attributes, University of Tasmania, 2002.
4. Conloy, David, The Daily Miracle, p267.
5. Juthamart Achalahun, July 2001.
6. Petersen, Joe, October 2002.
7. Barnard, Pip, October 2002,
8. Hills, Amy, October 2002.
9. Page, Melanie, October 2002.
10. Nicholson, Alistair 2001.
11. Juthamart Achalahun, July, 2002.
12. Melanie Hubble, 2001
13. Alistair Nicholson, October 2001.
14. Sean Ford, chief of staff, The Advocate, email correspondence with Nicola Goc, September, 2002.
15. Hills, Amy, October 2001.