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# Revisiting news editors’ evaluation of journalism courses and graduate employability

**ABSTRACT**

*This research project deployed one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with news editors in Perth, Western Australia, to evaluate journalism courses and student employability across the five Perth-based universities that teach journalism (Edith Cowan, Murdoch, Curtin, University of Western Australia [UWA] and Notre Dame universities). The 2022 interviews were undertaken with a view to compare and contrast the results to similar interviews published in 2014. The findings indicate that industry practitioners still think universities are typically the best place to teach journalism, and that students are highly competent in digital technologies. However, there is concern about the current state of graduate general and civil knowledge. Other trends include a growing sense that journalism students should be given training in public relations foundations and, additionally, that most editors would like to be involved with university curriculums. A major*

**KEYWORDS**

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*difference was an awareness during interviews in 2022 that tertiary staff cuts and financial pressures complicate the maintenance of high standards.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this research project was two-fold. First, it involved interviews with twelve news editors in Perth, Western Australia, in the first three months of 2022, focusing on the job readiness and capability of tertiary-educated journalism graduates. Second, these interviews were compared to interviews with eleven news editors in Perth from a similar research project published in 2014 (Cullen 2014). We unpack both the current attitudes on tertiary journalism programmes from the view of industry practitioners in Perth, and the ways in which those views have or have not changed over an eight-year period.

As the following study will illustrate, the resounding sense across the interview cohort was that universities are still typically the best place to teach journalism, and that students are highly competent in digital technologies. However, there is concern about the current state of graduate general and civil knowledge. Other trends which emerged, that will be unpacked further, include a growing sense that journalism students should be given training in public relations (PR) foundations and, additionally, that most editors would like to be involved with university curriculums. It also emerged that practitioners tend to be only *somewhat* convinced that journalism education has improved in the past ten to fifteen years. This is tempered by an awareness across the cohort that tertiary staff cuts and financial pressures complicate the maintenance of high standards.

### ***Western Australia media and universities***

As the prime focus of this project is on news editors and their views on journalism education and job readiness among journalism graduates in Western Australia (WA), it is important to understand the media and tertiary landscape. The West Australian state is the largest in Australia and it has a diverse media landscape with a mix of legacy and digital media outlets. The major players in the market include both commercial and public broadcasters, newspapers and online news websites. In terms of television, there are three main free-to-air commercial broadcasters: Seven Network, Nine Network and Channel 10. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) also have a presence in the state. The commercial radio market is dominated by three major players: Southern Cross Austereo, Australian Radio Network and NOVA Entertainment. ABC also operates several regional radio stations in Western Australia. The main newspapers in Western Australia are *The West Australian*, which is published daily, and *The Sunday Times*, which is published on Sundays, and there are sixteen community newspapers that serve local areas. Online news outlets such as *WAtoday* and *PerthNow* have become increasingly popular in recent years. Overall, while Western Australia's media landscape may not be as large or diverse as in the rest of Australia, there is still a range of options available for those seeking news and information across different mediums. Interviews with news editors in 2014 and 2022 reflected the mix of these media platforms – newspapers, television, radio and online.

Western Australia has five Perth-based universities and include: Curtin University, Edith Cowan University, Notre Dame University, Murdoch

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University and the University of Western Australia. These universities offer a range of undergraduate and postgraduate journalism courses and degrees. Curtin offers the largest programme and UWA the smallest programme. All the universities have work placement agreements with various media outlets, and news editors and journalists are often invited to speak at the annual Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia (JERAA) conference, with the last one being held in Perth, Western Australia, in December 2022. In total, there are 30 universities in Australia that teach both undergraduate and postgraduate journalism courses with most of them located on the eastern coast of Australia (Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia website 2023).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW OF INDUSTRY EXPECTATIONS: CONTEXTUALIZING THE LANDSCAPE**

It is more than 100 years since the first Australian university-based journalism programme was established, with the University of Western Australia the first to offer informal lectures for journalists in 1919. The first formal courses were offered by University of Melbourne and University of Queensland in 1921 (Tanner 2014). There has been extensive media research in the past twenty years in both Australia and the United States on industry expectations of journalism graduates. Early on, Australian studies of mainstream media employers revealed a generally conservative attitude about the skills and qualities they demand in journalists (Callaghan and McManus 2010).

Joseph (2004) interviewed employers from four international newspapers and found a preference for graduates with a strong news sense, critical thinking, confidence, curiosity and writing ability. The study concluded that these attributes can only be partly taught. Nankervis substantiated these findings in her analysis of Australian broadcast employers and concluded that 'there appears to be little concern at any of the networks for recruits to have skills related to new technology such as desktop video editing, reporter-orientated cameras or bulletin software' (2005: 111). This qualitative survey of free-to-air news networks found that news managers valued 'news hungry' journalists over technologically driven ones (Nankervis 2005). This preference was echoed in a 2011 study which surveyed third-year students, working television journalists and senior managers and found 'pre-digital' skills like news sense, critical thinking and ethical sensitivity consistently rated as more important across the three groups of participants (Nankervis 2005).

Specific case studies looked at the implementation of skills in blogging (Chung et al. 2007) and podcasting (Huntsberger and Stavitsky 2006) or the introduction of convergent concepts in a newsroom setting (Lewis 2009). Moving into the 2010s, however, there were a number of studies showing how undergraduates used digital technology, such as mobile phones, the internet and social media, and suggested ways that these tools could be integrated into journalism curricula (Bethell 2010; Hirst and Treadwell 2011; Hubbard et al. 2011; Koutsoukos and Biggins 2010; Rollins 2010; Schwartz 2008). The consensus seemed to be that convergent skills had their place in journalism curricula but they should be pegged to industry demands and adopted without compromising basic journalism competencies. Meanwhile, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) model curricula for journalism education argued for a much stronger educational structure but 'with a balance between the practical and the academic' (UNESCO 2007: 7–8).

While convergence multimedia skills were encouraged, journalism education in universities was encouraged to provide students with a broad knowledge base and well-developed research and analytical skills (UNESCO 2007: 7–8). Marron noted that a report from the Poynter Institute on *The Core Skills for the Future of Journalism* exposed ‘a wide divergence between professionals and educators in their thinking on the importance of core journalism skills, especially those skills that are essential for mastering new methods of gathering and delivering news and information’ (2014: 124). Professionals (journalists and editors) did not rate the importance of multimedia skills as highly as educators, students or independent journalists.

Perhaps on the back of these industry trends, the focus on ‘convergence’ in journalism education has waned. This may also be because, moving into the 2020s, convergence is now so embedded in everyday life that it no longer requires a conscious expression of its nature and practice in news making and newsrooms. For example, in the mid- to late-2000s, several studies exposed industry anxieties that a preoccupation with multimedia and convergence would place too much emphasis on technology rather than foundational skills like research and writing (Birge 2006; Nankervis 2005; Aumente 2007; Bhuiyan 2010). Yet, in our examination, none of the interview participants expressed any concerns about the current use of technology nor the risk of it displacing the foundations of journalism practice. In fact, interview participants unanimously agreed that graduates were well-trained in technologies (such as navigating complex content management systems and translating content into various formats for multimodal consumption) and that this was a welcome competency.

More recently, there have been calls to focus on internationalization (Glitsos 2021), entrepreneurship, and to emphasize ‘models or metaphors such as the idea of the teaching hospital’ (Solkin 2022: 444). Using literature review methodology, Glitsos (2021: 1–2) argues for a need to rejuvenate a global vision for journalism education, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 rebuilding process. She emphasizes this pertinence for ‘students in the Australian communications network, which has a legacy tradition of insularity that is cultivated by geographical isolation’ (2021: 2). Laurence Solkin (2022: 446), using literature review methodology to develop a thematic analysis of key discussions based on a sample of over 300 separate published pieces, demonstrates the keen awareness across journalism education that real experience fosters genuine learning, and as such, scholar-practitioners are best suited to journalism education roles and curriculum development.

### ***Previous interviews with Perth-based news editors***

There were two previous research projects that surveyed Perth-based editors prior to the 2022 research. Callaghan and MacManus (2010) explored what skills employers wanted in journalism graduates via face-to-face interviews with ten senior editors and news directors. The interviewees included three representatives from two newspapers, two online news outlets, three television stations and two radio stations. The highest ranked skills among the editors included traditional journalistic attributes such as good spelling, grammar and punctuation and enthusiasm to find stories, clarity of writing and an ability to learn. The editors were less convinced of the need for graduates to demonstrate these skills across platforms. The flaws they saw in graduates included poor writing skills, a lack of general knowledge and

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news awareness, and what they perceived as a poor work ethic (Callaghan and McManus 2010: 19).

Cullen (2014: 1) conducted face-to-face interviews with eleven Perth-based news editors in their respective newsrooms between 2012 and 2013 and published in 2014. The interviewees were selected on the basis that they were the ones who hire journalism graduates to work in their respective media organizations. A questionnaire of 26 questions about industry needs and tertiary journalism programmes was administered during face-to-face interviews, all of which were recorded and transcribed. The interviewees represented a cross-section of media outlets in Perth, with the editors working for at least one of the following platforms: television, radio, print and online.

The editors agreed that there was a key role for universities in providing both an educational background and skills-based training for graduates contemplating a career in journalism and early career journalists. There was full agreement on two areas of weakness: spelling, grammar and syntax; and the development of general knowledge. Other areas of concern included a poor sense among graduates about what is news and newsworthiness, news writing skills, lack of initiative and an inability to generate story ideas. These findings are largely mirrored in previous Australian studies with mainstream media employers (Alysen 2007; Callaghan and McManus 2010; Mensing 2010; Nankervis 2011). There was full support for an introductory unit on PR so that students can deal with the pervasive and persuasive nature of PR in the workplace. This was a new idea not mentioned in previous studies. It was generally agreed that while individual universities have good working relationships with industry, these were often individual and not institutional relationships (Cullen 2014: 12).

There were, however, two notable differences among the editors. First, there was division among them about whether university-based degrees should be generalist in nature or journalistic; and second, whether they should be theory-oriented or practical in nature. However, the editors, for the most part, encouraged universities to work more closely with industry, with a belief that industry could have broader input into programme design and revitalization (Cullen 2014: 13).

While the 2014 interview findings echoed many of the 2010 interview responses, especially the call to uphold traditional journalistic values, attributes and skills, there was a new ingredient in 2014: a willingness to work more closely with universities in the area of curriculum development. Also, there was full support for an introductory unit on PR so that students could deal with the pervasive and persuasive nature of PR in the workplace. It must be noted that the 2014 interviews were first undertaken in 2012 and 2013. Ten years later in 2022, it seemed appropriate to review the attitudes of Perth-based editors to see what had remained or changed.

## **METHODS, METHODOLOGY AND INTERVIEW COHORT**

The key focus of this research was to compare the findings of two interview-based research projects of full-time news editors in Western Australia in 2014 and 2022, and determine if there were any changes in industry attitudes towards university journalism education. In early 2022, the data collection for the qualitative research project was undertaken over a three-month period via structured interviews that used the same 26 pre-determined questions as in the 2014 interviews, which included a mixed of open-ended questions

Table 1: List of interview participants.

<b>Practitioner</b>	<b>Role/s</b>	<b>No. of years (in industry)</b>	<b>Organization</b>
Amanda Keenan	Managing Editor	28	<i>The West Australian</i>
Laura Newell	Readers' Editor	15	<i>The West Australian</i>
	Intern Program Coordinator		
	Editor – Agenda section Columnist		
Pamela Magill	Executive Editor	25	<i>Ten News</i>
Arylene Westlake-Jennings	Editor	1	<i>PerthNow</i> (Metro)
Andrew O'Connor	News Editor	35	<i>ABC Perth</i> (Metro)
Daile Cross	Deputy Editor/Acting Editor	20	<i>WAToday</i> (Metro)
Sean Cowan	Managing Director	16	Business news (Metro)
Adrian Beattie	News Director	35	GWN7 (Regional)
Anthony de Ceglie	Editor	15	<i>The West Australian</i> (Metro)
Kema Johnson	News Director	7	<i>6PR</i> (Metro)
David Johns	Online Editor	15	<i>The West Australian</i> (Metro)
Ray Kuka	News Director	9	<i>Seven Perth</i> (Metro and Regional)

and Likert-scale modelled questions. Twelve industry practitioners, who were acting as current news editors, were interviewed and each asked the same set of same questions as in the 2014 interviews. The interview cohort had an average experience in news media of 18.4 years compared to 22 years in 2014. One notable difference was that while the 2014 interviews were face-to-face, the 2022 interviews were conducted online due to COVID restrictions. The news editors were allocated the same time as in the 2014 interviews – 60 minutes each.

Editors were chosen, rather than journalists, for the interviews in 2014 and 2022 as they were seen as the ones who ultimately decide who works in their media organization. It should be noted that only one of the editors in the 2014 and 2022 cohort worked as a journalist and then left to teach as a journalism academic for four years. He returned to the newsroom and became a news editor. For purposes of brevity, and because of answer overlaps, this article focuses on just thirteen questions (out of 26) that deal primarily with whether universities are the best place to train journalists and on the relationship between industry and the academy. It does not dwell on the question of programme accreditation, or of the best balance between theory and practice in programme design.

This research project design was supported and approved via the ECU Research Ethics Committee under file number 2021-03151-CULLEN. Like

many interview-based projects, one limitation is that researchers cannot always completely mitigate the ways in which their own positionality will affect participant responses; however, the research design was built alongside ethics committee review.

## RESULTS

### ***Are universities the best place to teach journalism?***

Of all the questions asked in 2012 and 2014, this was the one that had the greatest potential to generate debate. This is because there is often a tense, even acrimonious, relationship between university-based journalism programmes and Australia's major media companies who are the employers of choice for many journalism graduates. This reached a peak with the publication of several critical opinion pieces in *The Australian* newspaper on the relevance of tertiary journalism courses (Wake 2020; Reynolds 2020).

Previously, in the context of the 2014 interviews, Stewart (2012) argued that journalism academics were out of touch with the realities of the newsroom and were indoctrinating students with a 'jaundiced' view of the industry. But these accusations were met at the time with strident rebuttals from the academy (Price 2012; Anon 2012), highlighting tensions over whether journalism education should reproduce or challenge existing industry norms. In drafting the 2022 interview question, it was believed that there might still be a divide between respondents.

*Table 2: Interview question.*

<b>Are universities the best place to teach journalism?</b>	
Strongly disagree	0
Disagree	0
Neutral	2
Agree	6
Strongly agree	4

Responses, however, to the 2014 and 2022 interviews showed most editors acknowledged universities had an important role to play in the training of journalists, suggesting that a partnership between university and industry might be the best approach. This was evident in one particulate statement in which a respondent asserted that graduates 'need the knowledge base and the academic basis on politics, history, writing and grammar and all those things that you get from being around the brains of a university'. One editor, however, remained neutral, even unsure, arguing that, 'universities are not the only institutions that can teach journalism – TAFE or Jschoools also do, and they award diplomas and micro-credentials'. Overall, no respondent disagreed either in part or fully with the notion that universities have some role in developing journalism talent.

### ***How would you describe your relationship with journalism educators?***

Despite an often-difficult relationship between the academy and media employers, the evidence from the 2022 interviews showed a more cooperative



*Table 3: Interview question.*

<b>How would you describe your relationship with journalism educators?</b>	
Non-existent	0
Poor	0
Fair	2
Good	8
Very good	2

working relationship than the 2014 interviews when only four editors thought their relationship with journalism educators was good. This increased to eight editors in the 2022 research project. This is a definite improvement.

However, this needs to be qualified, because the relationship still tends to exist at a personal level, with individual lecturers and industry representatives forging and maintaining links. These relationships also tend to be geographically situated, with staff from individual media organizations tending to work more closely with staff from a nearby institution, rather than those from further away, including other states. Such relationships were based on a number of factors, including previous work relationships, friendships and individual initiatives. As one editor stated: 'I know Curtin better than the others as I taught there for four years'. Often, the relationship was an historic one based on a request from the university to establish a formal internship arrangement or an invitation from a media organization to host interns.

Further, the quality of the graduates plays a critical role. As one editor in 2022 commented:

[m]ost of our hiring is through our intern program at the moment. Simply, because the guys come in and they fall in love with us, and we fall in love with them. We don't mean to make it happen, and we do put positions out, but actually, what we're finding is that the universities that are putting up candidates and we're hiring them because they're fab.

These relationships (both personal and institutional) have become the locus for cross-organization pollination, and it was evident that the attitude towards journalism educators was more positive in 2022 than in 2014, even though it was sometimes based on intent rather than solid commitment. In the words of one respondent, there was a sense that editors may not always be able to 'actively pursue' opportunities with the academy but that 'intentions are there'. Regardless, this suggests a marked shift in the relational dynamic between industry and the university structure.

### ***Has journalism education improved in the last ten to fifteen years?***

Most of the editors who participated in the 2014 interview process clearly believed the quality of university-based journalism education in Perth had improved (without stressing an exact timeline), especially in the area of digital technology and social media. A constant theme among the editors was that universities provide the initial training, which is then value-added by the employers.

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Table 4: Interview question.

<b>Has journalism education improved in the last ten to fifteen years?</b>	
No	2
Not really	0
Neutral	2
Somewhat	5
Very much so	2

However, the majority of editors in 2022 were not convinced that progress had been made since 2014, and they offered various reasons for the slide: One editor did not mince his words: '[t]he programs have gone backwards because of university cut-backs to staff, less resources and low student numbers. Also, programs are not robust enough and now there's no flagstone university for journalism in Perth'. Another editor blamed the slowness to introduce changes stating that: '[u]niversity curriculum is inadequate as it can take up to 18 months to get changes passed, and there are too many non-relevant first-year units'.

### ***Do you think there are too many journalism courses?***

The responses here were somewhat variable, but generally, the feeling among the editors in the 2014 interviews was that there were probably too many tertiary journalism courses, especially as the five universities in Perth (Edith Cowan, Murdoch, Curtin, Notre Dame and UWA) teach the subject with varying numbers of units, courses and awards. This view was *not* re-echoed in the 2022 interviews with eight of the twelve editors suggesting there was a sufficient number of journalism courses.

Table 5: Interview questions.

<b>Do you think there are too many journalism courses?</b>	
Yes, too many	2
Somewhat	2
Good amount	3
Not enough	5
Not nearly enough	0

While one respondent indicated that '[i]t's good to have choice and competition' not everyone agreed. For example, another respondent suggested that they felt, '[i]t was ok 20 years ago but now there are too many universities teaching the same content with fewer resources' and that '[j]ournalism is not the great career it was 15–20 years ago'.

### ***Do you think journalism graduates are well trained in technology?***

Table 6 reflects a very slight change in attitudes towards graduate training in technology which, through discussion with the editors, related largely to

*Table 6: Interview question.*

<b>Do you think journalism graduates are well trained in technology?</b>	
A very poor amount	0
A poor amount	0
A fair amount	2
A good amount	5
A very good amount	5

navigating complex content management systems and translating content into various formats for multimodal consumption. All the editors in the 2014 interviews agreed that journalism graduates were well trained in technology, especially in the areas of digital technology, especially with social media and smartphone journalism. In 2014, ten editors strongly agreed and one agreed, where this was less emphatic in 2022.

A constant theme among these editors was that universities provide the initial training. Responses to this question in 2022 showed a dip in approval as more than half the editors referred to 'good' and 'fair' but not 'excellent' training. When pursued further, one editor explained that, '[t]hey can do the basic stuff but they are weak on analytics, especially AI and big data'. However, a limitation of the study is that we did not pursue this detail further and unpack the more specific nature of the ways which students could improve in digital technology.

### ***Should journalism education programmes teach shorthand?***

One of the most interesting yet perplexing outcomes of the 2022 research was in relation to the discussion of shorthand as a skill. While nine out of the twelve participants selected either 'somewhat' or 'very much so' in answer to whether shorthand should still be taught at university level, on deeper conversation, all participants conceded that it is of declining use.

Some editors admitted that they knew shorthand but now rarely used it and finally questioned its value in a modern newsroom: '[w]e train graduates in shorthand, but I do wonder beyond that how useful it is as a skill'.

Another editor in 2022 echoed a common refrain when she said: '[a]s someone who only ever writes in shorthand, I think it's incredibly valuable. However, everyone just records their interviews on the phone these days. So, I don't think it's necessary'. Again, one editor also added that, in fact: '[w]ith the use of laptops, even in the Courts, it is rather redundant except in specialised reporting', while another editor summed it up when he said: '[i]t's still used in the field although not as much as in the past'. Anecdotally, we suggest this

*Table 7: Interview question.*

<b>Should journalism education programmes teach shorthand?</b>	
No	2
Not really	1
Neutral	0
Somewhat	1
Very much so	8

ambivalence – and thus contradiction between the qualitative and quantitative data – emerges from the fact that the participant cohort was largely veteran (meaning they would have certainly learned shorthand themselves as part of a cadetship-style entry into the profession) and therefore shorthand is therefore *notionally* understood as a 'core' journalism skill despite its declining necessity.

### ***Should journalism programmes include an introduction to public relations?***

This question was potentially problematic, given the traditional negative attitudes of journalists to PR and marketing. However, the responses were surprising in both the 2014 and 2022 interviews with a significant number of respondents (nine editors in both research projects) indicating support that students be offered an introduction to at least one PR subject.

*Table 8: Interview question.*

<b>Should journalism programmes include an introduction to public relations?</b>	
No	2
Not really	1
Neutral	0
Somewhat	4
Very much so	5

Drilling down into the responses, the reason for this was not because many graduates would ultimately find jobs in PR or marketing, but rather one of self-interest. One editor commented: '[i]f you teach them PR, they will know when they are being manipulated by someone who is in PR, or working for a member of parliament. An introduction to PR would be helpful', and another editor said: '[i]t sounds sensible to include a unit since journos encounter PR in all its forms and guises on a daily basis'.

### ***When recruiting does your organization tend to employ people with a journalism degree?***

In the 2014 interviews, nine out of eleven editors agreed a journalism degree offered candidates an advantage when it came to applying for positions. All agreed that a tertiary journalism qualification provided the building blocks employers were looking for, although many were not willing to conclude that all graduates they saw were job-ready.

This was not the case with the 2022 interviews with only seven out of twelve news editors fully supportive of tertiary educated journalism graduates. Why the change? One editor offered his explanation: '[i]t depends on the candidate entirely. I think with an older candidate we definitely consider them without a degree. We tend to find that life experience is a real plus, particularly if they've gone on and become a journalist'. Another reason for a possible shift away from tertiary qualifications was that editors 'employ graduates with no media training but who have a law or an economics degree'. However, in direct contrast, another said: '[w]e prefer to employ journalism graduates with a degree. Previous editors were not that bothered'. Time will tell if this is just a blip or a definite trend.

*Table 9: Interview question.*

<b>When recruiting does your organization tend to employ people with a journalism degree?</b>	
No	2
Not really	1
Neutral	2
Somewhat	4
Very much so	3

Responses in 2014 and 2022 differed as to the nature of the qualifications they preferred. While some indicated a preference for a full three-year qualification, others pointed to the advantages offered by a degree in another discipline and the add-on of a graduate diploma or a master's degree. While the majority of successful applicants tended to have journalism degrees, prospective employers said that they were always on the lookout for people who can offer something different. Examples cited by some editors included a trainee with a degree in medicine who added a professional dimension to a health round and another with a Ph.D. in mathematics who added to the newsroom's capacity to interpret statistics, budgets and opinion poll results. Further, science graduates and people with degrees in business or finance were seen as bringing special forensic skills to the workplace. Apart from tertiary qualifications, both sets of editors pointed to a worrying lack of general and civic knowledge among graduates and a lack of familiarity with court, legal and ethical issues.

### ***Do you feel like journalism graduates have good general knowledge?***

This question was prompted by anecdotal feedback from various lecturers and a desire to test the view of industry employers. The majority of news editors in 2022 said students' level of general knowledge was 'variable' and depended on factors including their age and life experience. Employers found (perhaps unsurprisingly) that students who consumed a broad diet of media had an advantage.

Conversely, one editor noted that those who failed to read widely lacked 'literacy of the craft'. One respondent commented that: '[s]omeone who wants to be a journalist should be naturally curious, and reading two or three papers today. That's what marks out exceptional graduates'. Only one editor

*Table 10: Interview question.*

<b>Do you feel like journalism graduates have good general knowledge?</b>	
No	1
Not really	3
Variable	6
Somewhat	0
Very much so	0

thought graduates lacked well-rounded general knowledge. This editor taught in a university setting which lends context to his comment that their lack of knowledge 'may be due to a reduction in staff, courses, resources and student numbers'. News editors in 2014 were equally worried by a lack of civil and political knowledge among graduates and encouraged journalism educators to focus on these gaps in understanding.

***Does the relationship you currently have influence where you take graduates from***

As mentioned elsewhere in this analysis, the prior work experience of journalism academics, professional relationships and even friendships that exist between university staff and industry practitioners can be factors in employers' familiarity with university programmes. This is supported by two of the respondents responding with 'somewhat' to this question. Overwhelmingly though, editors did not credit these links with influencing their hiring choices.

*Table 11: Interview question.*

**Does the relationship you currently have influence whether you take graduates from these universities over those from other universities whose programmes you may not be familiar with?**

No	4
Not really	4
Neutral	2
Somewhat	2
Very much so	0

A reasonable conclusion would be that the large number of graduates, compared with the relatively small number of available jobs, means employers can (and are) carefully choosing candidates with skills, knowledge and mindset to meet their needs. Or, as one editor responded to the question: 'I wouldn't say so, because I've hired people from interstate'.

In contrast, in the 2014 interviews, the preference among the editors was to employ graduates from local universities where they had a long-term working relationship.

***Does your organization take interns/work placements?***

COVID-19 restrictions had a huge impact on internships/work placements in 2020, 2021 and early 2022. Many news organizations separated employees into teams, working remotely or if in the office. Visitors were prohibited to reduce the risk of infection of employees.

Despite these recent restrictions, the majority of employers still see it as advantageous to offer work placements and increase the number of placements offered each year. A regional television station was the only organization

*Table 12: Interview question.*

**Does your organization take interns/work placements?**

Yes	11
No	1

in this sample that did not offer work placements. It stopped in 2020 after the parent company decided it was an insurance risk. In the 2014 interviews, it was a common practice among the editors to encourage placements but that there had been a marked decline in the number on offer.

### ***Do you use internships to test the suitability of students for potential positions?***

Overall, the prevalence of ‘try before you buy’, where editors use internships to test the suitability of students for jobs, remained a constant theme in the 2014 and 2022 interviews. In 2014, eleven editors agreed or strongly agreed they used internships as a test. In 2022, it was ten.

Critical thinking plus the ability to translate complicated concepts into everyday language and competent interpersonal skills are some of the required skills in today’s media workplace. Add in varying technical skills to meet changing digital demands and the job description for an employee is increasingly complicated. Of the two news editors in 2022 who answered in the negative, one editor was from an organization that did not take interns. The other said they only took interns, ‘for teaching, as a favour to industry’ and ‘preferred to employ staff with more experience’.

*Table 13: Interview question.*

<b>Do you use internships to test the suitability of students for potential positions?</b>	
Yes	10
No	2

The internship serves various purposes, given the view expressed by many of the editors that journalism is a mindset as well as a skill set. As a teaching tool it offers students valuable insight into the realities of the job. It allows employers to guide the next generation, while identifying talent that may fit their individual organizations’ requirements and culture. As one editor noted: ‘[w]hy on Earth wouldn’t you do that if you’ve got a very strong candidate? You’d be an absolute idiot not to!’

### ***There is a view that there is a ‘disconnect’ between academia and industry***

While it could be argued universities and media organizations share a common purpose to share knowledge, an inherent tension remains in this relationship. Namely, that while graduate employability is one way to gauge student success for universities it is not the only one. Skills of higher thinking, reasoning, challenging and researching new concepts are also important. Newsrooms need people who can bring those skills and

*Table 14: Interview question.*

<b>There is a view that there is a ‘disconnect’ between academia and industry, what are your views?</b>	
Yes	4
Varies/unsure	3
No	4

who are familiar with the tasks required to be performed in a convergent newsroom.

As one editor in 2022, the only journalist from a family of academics noted:

*It is different. You've got space to think (in academia). In a modern newsroom there is no space to think. You can't. It is never-ending, and the pressure is immense. Academia, by its very definition, has to have space to think and (that) isn't our job because it can't be.*

(emphasis added)

Another editor commented that:

*When you're facing five deadlines, you can't sit back and think about intricacies of something you're interpreting. I fear that often academics who are making KPIs for courses dismiss that as 'industry training' after a student graduates, rather than being critical to their basic skills for when they are graduating.*

Another editor observed: 'Unis train them, we mould them – it's a good balance'.

There was another view that current industry experience was of benefit to academics with one participant stating:

*I don't think you can teach journalism unless you've done it. I can't imagine that you could teach medicine if you haven't practised it. I think you need lived experience, especially because journalism is not just about the skill set, it's about an attitude.*

In the 2014 interviews, editors expressed similar feelings with some stressing that they only work closely with particular educators.

### **Common areas of concern in 2014 and 2022**

Editors' views on the need for improved general knowledge have been noted elsewhere but the theme continued in response to this question. Similarly, familiarity with the processes of the courts, parliament and freedom of information searches were also cited. This exact question was not posed in 2014 but in the 2022 interviews, editors were asked, '[a]nything else about the students?', eliciting responses such as: '[t]ell graduates to read, listen and watch the news every day'; 'prepare graduates to work long hours'; 'help graduates to view news writing as a key skill'; 'tell graduates to know the law in regard to media practice and encourage graduates to persist when digging for a story'.

In 2022, some aspects of digital technology were still a concern as graduates were more familiar with communicating via text rather than face-to-face. The ability to pick up a phone and have a conversation was noted as a skill that needs developing. Whether this should be added to skills development or otherwise was not canvassed.

One editor wondered whether skills in crisis management and dealing with mental health (their own and others') would be useful:

*You're seeing them come up more and more because people are talking about their feelings a lot more. We often become people who are in people's lives and learn very sad and very intimate details or see moments in history that have a great impact on the world.*



Table 15: Interview question.

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**Judging by the graduates you host in your organization, are there any skills you believe journalism education programmes need to focus on that they are not yet providing?**

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No (x2)

Public affairs

Plagiarism

Vocal/phone use

Crisis management (logistical and emotional capacity to respond to crises)

Newsroom

Critical thinking skills

Court reporting/civics

Media literacy/work placement

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This editor also commented that psychological advice and crisis management skills would be ‘really important (for graduates) going forward’ and that these skills are ‘very much underestimated’.

## CONCLUSION

The key focus of this research was to compare the findings of two interview-based research projects of news editors in Western Australia in 2014 and 2022 and determine if there were any changes in industry attitudes towards university journalism education. Overall, it was encouraging to discover that news editors in the 2014 and 2022 interviews showed genuine enthusiasm to engage with universities to develop students’ skills and knowledge. They insisted that universities still play an important role in the training of journalists. Other areas of agreement included an acknowledgement that time and resources are often limited in both the university setting and the industry, meaning that the responsibility of graduate development lies at the nexus between the two sectors. This also confirms that industry and academia must work closely together in order to leverage the resources of either sector. We cannot find, among the literature, any other research of this nature in which researchers interview local news editors about the currency of graduate journalist skillsets in a single state. We anticipate that there may be comparative differences between states and territories because of the different contexts of industry demands, course structures, population size differences and media ownership may shift conversations. This is impossible to know definitively without data from those contexts, and we call for further research to be carried out in respective locales.

Interestingly, editors expressed that graduate *mindset* was the prevailing quality of successful transitions to industry. While the editors understood that some fundamental skills could be taught, such as interviewing or writing, the majority of news editors thought success lies in deeper attributes such as curiosity and the ability to navigate critical thinking. This proposes a different challenge for university educators. If they are to meet the needs of media

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employers and properly equip our students with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed, embedding more of these generalist skills in content would be beneficial. The editors, for the most part, found students technically adept and capable of reporting across platforms but had lost the general knowledge providing the scaffolding against which questions of higher purpose of intent may be sparked. There was agreement about the current state of graduate general and civil knowledge and that journalism students should be given training in PR foundations.

One striking difference between the news editors was a more negative view about the quality of journalism education among the 2022 interviewees who were only *somewhat* convinced that journalism education has improved in past ten to fifteen years. This was tempered by an awareness across that tertiary staff cuts and financial pressures complicate the maintenance of high standards.

On a broader note, it is important for journalism educators to engage in dialogue and research with their local and national news editors as they not only provide employment for graduates, but, as in the case of Western Australia, they want to (and do) provide feedback and insights which are invaluable for creating a relevant curriculum that responds to the evolving needs of industry and graduates. Evidence of this in Western Australia is their participation in research, interviews, industry panels at journalism education conferences, guest lectures and as curriculum committee members. Long may the partnership continue.

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