Employer expectations of professional writing and publishing graduates: Executive Summary and Recommendations

Rachel Robertson
June 15, 2011
1. Purpose and Methodology

The purpose of this research is to identify employers’ current and future requirements of graduates working in the communications, professional writing and publishing fields. The findings will inform our curriculum development and our learning and assessment strategies and provide valuable information to our current and potential students about the skills, knowledge and attributes sought by employers.

The research consisted of the following three stages.

1. A review and analysis of the Australian literature on employers’ expectations of graduates and projected areas of growth or new roles for communications and publishing workers. This resulted in Appendix A.

2. Administration of the Graduate Employability Indicators (GEI) online surveys developed by Professor Beverly Oliver et al which collected the views of alumni, employers and teaching staff on fourteen graduate capabilities. This was administered by the Curtin Office of Teaching and Learning and resulted in a Report for Professional Writing (part of the Comprehensive Course Review documentation). Forty-three employers were invited to complete the survey and seventeen responded (ie 40% response rate).

3. A series of semi-structured interviews with eight WA employers exploring the technical and generic skills expected of graduates by senior managers, how these skills are applied in the workplace, and the predicted role of social media and other changes on communications and publications roles. None of the eight employers interviewed were invited to respond to the survey. A summary of the interviews forms Appendix B.

2. Key Findings

It is clear from this research that employers of all sizes and in all industries continue to require graduates with high level generic skills, many of which are taught in the PWP program. As jobs become more specialised in some industries, the need for generalist communicators and writers will only grow. Similarly, the growth of digital publishing, social media and other developing technologies will increase the demand for highly skilled communications graduates. On line writing, editing and publishing skills are key skills which will be in demand in the future in Australia and internationally.

Employer survey and interview responses highlighted the importance of creative thinking and writing skills as well as professional communication, editing and publishing skills. Indeed, the new focus on social media as a key communication tool has led employers to value even more the ability of graduates to think laterally and communicate creatively through the development of a narrative that speaks to a range of audiences.
Some of the key skills that employers felt graduates needed and didn't always have included higher level analytical skills, greater confidence and competence in oral communication, high level interpersonal and team work skills, basic website editing skills, and skills in using the InDesign desktop publishing software.

Areas of knowledge that employers believed graduates needed and didn’t always have included an understanding of visual design and how photographs and other visual material can be used in conjunction with text, an understanding of how government works, and an understanding of basic workplace standards and expectations.

3. Recommendations

These research findings have implications for curriculum and teaching, for marketing and for resourcing of the PWP program.

It is recommended:

1. That the PWP program maintain the current approach of integrating learning in the areas of creative non-fiction writing, research and analysis, the genres and conventions of professional communication, and editing and publishing.

2. That a new Advanced Editing and Publishing Unit (to commence in 2012) be developed to teach on line editing and publishing.

3. That one of the Editing and Publishing Units includes a focus on developing student skills in the use of InDesign.

4. That additional learning resources covering visual design and the use of photographs be introduced to the Editing and Publishing units.

5. That learning and assessment strategies in all third year units be reviewed in order to integrate learning and assessment of high level analytical skills, interpersonal communication and team work skills.

6. That additional learning resources and guest lecturers from other programs at Curtin covering policy development and analysis, how government works, and information on workplace standards and expectations be introduced to the Writing and Research for Professional Contexts Unit.

7. That this research be shared with the Careers Centre in order to assist them to work with PWP graduates to find appropriate employment.

8. That this research be shared with HIMO, Curtin OUA and the Future Students’ Centre in order to assist them to market the PWP program to potential students.

9. That PWP staff undertake professional development in writing and editing in the on line and social media environment and on the use of InDesign.
10. That PWP inaugurate an in-house publication training facility for its students, with its own publishing arm, possibly developed with Design, to publish (where needed) in-house materials from other Schools and Faculties.
Appendix A
Employer expectations of professional writing and publishing graduates: A literature review

Report: Nathan Scolaro
Project Manager: Rachel Robertson
April 28, 2011
1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

The purpose of this research is to provide a summary of the Australian literature available on employers' views and expectations of graduates working in the communications, professional writing and publishing fields. It also aims to identify any areas of projected employment growth as well as new jobs relevant to Curtin University's Professional Writing and Publishing graduates.

1.2 The Curtin Professional Writing and Publishing program

The Curtin University Professional Writing and Publishing program is aimed at the next generation of professional communicators: people working in (or freelancing for) state, federal and local government, business and industry, the not-for-profit sector, arts organisations and the magazine and book industries.

It is designed to foster students' creative nonfiction writing talents, developing their skills in storytelling while training them in specialised genres and conventions of professional communication and delivering advanced instruction in research, writing, editing and publishing.

1.3 Context

There has been an increased effort in the past two decades for higher education practitioners to understand the skills and attributes employers look for when recruiting graduates. This movement indicates a distinct shift from the traditional philosophy of universities which sees students undertake tertiary studies not necessarily for employment, but for sheer interest and desire to be better educated in that field. Now, the degree is seen as a ticket to the job; knowledge is treated as a marketable commodity and vocational courses – the demand and staffing for which are market driven – are displacing fundamental disciplines (Biggs, 2002). The growth of practice-based communications programs such as Professional Writing and Publishing therefore requires further input from employers to determine what is expected of graduates entering the workforce and how universities can best provide for that transition.

In addition, Australian employers are placing increasing emphasis on graduates (and therefore the universities educating them) to have a generic and transferable skill set, as well as various personal attributes, which will contribute to their ongoing employability (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2002). This is particularly relevant to Professional Writing and Publishing and other communications graduates because many of the generic capabilities employers are looking for (such as writing and presentation skills) are central to the discipline.

It's important to note that although strong demand is predicted to continue for communication programs that focus on the employability of graduates, the
changing nature of media has meant occupational categories and employment markets are also rapidly changing (Putnis et al, 2002, p.18). For example, the development of social media as an effective communication tool in workplaces has seen role of the professional communicator fragment and evolve in significant ways. Preparing students for new and “horizon” careers has thus been identified as a major challenge for communication curriculum development (Putnis et al, 2002, p.18).

1.4 Terminology and definitions

The following terms are often used interchangeably in literature pertaining to employer-graduate expectations and outcomes. For the purpose of this review, they will be defined thus:

**Employability**: The skills, understandings and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to secure employment and be successful in their chosen occupations to the benefit of themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy (Yorke, 2006).

**Generic skills**: The transferable skills, widely referred to as “employability skills”, which apply to graduates across all disciplines. They are seen as pivotal in an employee’s ability to keep up with a constantly evolving workplace, and include problem-solving, teamwork and communication skills among others.

**Job-specific skills**: The technical or specialist skills traditionally included in university curricula to address specific occupational requirements (Bridgstock, 2009).

**Personal attributes**: Non skill-based behaviours and attitudes such as enthusiasm, reliability and adaptability that contribute to a graduate’s overall employability.

1.5 Scope of the review

This literature review is part of a three-stage research process, including a Graduate Employability Indicator (GEI) e-survey to employers (conducted in conjunction with Curtin University’s Office of Teaching and Learning) and formal interviews with a select group of employers (all Perth-based), which will culminate in the form of a final report.

The literature surveyed herein encompasses academic essays, journal articles and reports (by various industry and government groups) which relate to the employability of graduates across all disciplines. It also references a number of university policies and procedures that have addressed the skills and attributes employers are looking for from their graduates.

It should be noted that most of the research into graduate employability has been conducted on a large and all-encompassing scale, thus making it difficult to identify the specific skills employers are looking for from each discipline.
(particularly in the field of humanities). There is still merit however in a close analysis of the generic skills and attributes employers require as these are fundamental to the teaching of Curtin's Professional Writing and Publishing program.

Another challenge has been discerning patterns and commonalities among the employers’ views when employers themselves are a diverse and often fragmented group (DEST, 2002). Most of the employers that have participated in the selected studies for review come from big companies, leaving small-to mediums and not-for-profits (all of which should hold equal weighting in this process) slightly out of the picture. This gap in the research will, to some extent, be addressed in both the GEI survey and formal interviews with employers that are taking place as part of the overall project.

2. Employability skills and graduate attributes

2.1 Generic skills

There have been a number of studies undertaken by both public and private bodies to determine the key generic skills employers require of entry-level and established employees. Across the board, these indicators vary little, usually by manner of terminology or classification if at all. The most widely recognised set is that presented in the Employability skills for the future report (DEST, 2002), which was the culmination of an extensive research project carried out by the Business Council of Australia and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry. The eight-point framework includes:

- Communication skills that contribute to productive and harmonious relations between employees and customers
- Teamwork skills that contribute to productive working relationships and outcomes
- Problem solving skills that contribute to productive outcomes
- Self-management skills that contribute to employee satisfaction and growth
- Planning and organising skills that contribute to long-term and short-term strategic planning
- Technology skills that contribute to effective execution of tasks
- Life-long learning skills that contribute to ongoing improvement and expansion in employee and company operations and outcomes
- Initiative and enterprise skills that contribute to innovative outcomes.

The report also breaks down each of these skills into a range of elements that employers identified as important, but would vary from job to job. For the purpose of this review, only those most relevant to the study of professional writing and publishing have been observed:
• Communication – listening and understanding, speaking clearly and directly, writing to the needs of the audience, negotiating responsively, reading independently, using numeracy effectively, establishing and using networks, being assertive, sharing information, persuading effectively, speaking and writing in languages other than English.

• Teamwork – working as an individual and as a member of a team; applying work skills to a range of situations; coaching, mentoring and giving feedback; identifying the strengths of team members.

• Problem solving – developing creative, innovative solutions; developing practical solutions; solving problems in teams; applying a range of strategies to problem solving.

• Initiative and enterprise – adapting to new situations; developing a strategic, creative, long-term vision; being creative; translating ideas into action; identifying opportunities not obvious to others.

• Planning and organisation – managing time and priorities (setting timelines, coordinating tasks for self and with other writers); being resourceful; establishing clear project goals and deliveries; collecting, analysing and organising information.

• Learning – using a range of mediums to learn, having enthusiasm for ongoing learning, being open to new ideas and techniques.

• Technology – having a range of basic IT skills.

• Self-management - articulating own ideas and vision, evaluating and monitoring own performance, working ethically.

In 2008, the Australian Council of Education Research investigated graduates’ employment outcomes five years after completion, and in addition to the above skills, also found “understanding different social contexts” and “understanding people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds” to be important graduate employability attributes.

2.2 Job-specific skills

As little research is available on the specific technical skills employers look for in professional writing and publishing graduates, most of the information pertaining to this category derives from university and TAFE course-related information.

Generally, the courses provide training in writing feature articles, speeches, reports, discussion papers, creative non-fiction essays, press releases and blogs, while exploring the principles of print and electronic publishing, concept development, scheduling, and copy editing.

North Melbourne Institute of TAFE’s Professional Writing program further indicates a need for graduates to have basic photography skills, business and legal knowledge, project management skills and the ability to interpret and respond to briefs on top of the specialised editing and writing skills it teaches.
RMIT University's Professional Writing and Editing Diploma also requires its students to have specific computer and photography skills, and University of Southern Queensland's Editing and Publishing course provides its candidates with copyright and media law knowledge as well as industry-related management skills upon graduation.

It should also be noted here that much of the research into graduate employability argues that the eight generic skills are best learned and applied within the context of specific disciplines (DEST, 2007). Such an approach emphasises the advantages of mapping these skills within curriculum and stresses the importance of universities and employers working together to appropriately define the parameters of the skill (DEST, 2007).

As the Graduate Employability Skills Final Report affirms, this flexibility is an important quality to emphasise in relation to broader degrees such as arts and science that often act as a springboard to a range of careers: "Many of those interviewed stressed that these degrees, because of their breadth or holistic nature, intrinsically develop generic or transferable skills" and thus lead to valuable employability outcomes (DEST, 2007).

2.3 Personal attributes

The Employability Skills for the Future report also found that entry-level and ongoing employees needed to reflect certain qualities which were acceptable to the rest of their colleagues and in line with the company's philosophy (2002). More specifically, it identified the following personal attributes as crucial to a graduate's overall employability:

- Loyalty
- An ability to deal with pressure
- A sense of humour
- Personal presentation
- Honesty and integrity
- Adaptability
- A balanced attitude to work and home life
- Positive self esteem
- Reliability
- Commitment
- Motivation and enthusiasm
- Common sense.

Bridstock argues that a sound career identity, supported by self-management skills and the ability to career-build, are two other personal attributes which contribute to enhanced employability (2009). Citing a study by Eby, Butts and Lockwood (2003), she claims students who have a well-developed concept of their career goals and a positive, realistic appraisal of their own abilities and aptitudes report themselves as possessing higher levels of employability than other students.
2.4 Employer views

There is overwhelming evidence to suggest that of all personal, generic and job-specific attributes a graduate can acquire, communication skills (both oral and written) are the most highly sought after by Australian employers.

The DEST's *Employer Satisfaction with Graduate Skills Report* (2000) found creativity and flair, communication skills and the capacity for independent and critical thinking to be the most important attributes employers look for in graduates, while the skills which appeared to be most deficient (particularly among the newly employed) were problem solving, oral business communication, and interpersonal skills with other staff. Arts, humanities and social science graduates rated most poorly when it came to personal presentation and grooming, and oral communication skills (DEST, 2000).

A follow-up to this report by the DEST in 2007 found that recruiters were generally satisfied with job-specific skills of graduates, but placed greater importance on their interpersonal skills, industry-related experience and ability to promptly apply the knowledge gained at university in the real work settings.

Another useful point of reference is the annual Graduate Outlook Survey, conducted by Graduate Careers Australia. Data from the 2007 survey (the most recent available at no cost) rates interpersonal and communication skills as the most sought-after attribute when recruiting graduates:

**Top 10 selection criteria for recruiting graduates**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Selection Criteria</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal &amp; Communication Skills (written and oral)</td>
<td>54.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Reasoning &amp; Analytical Skills/Problem Solving/Lateral Thinking/Technical Skills</td>
<td>40.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passion/Knowledge of Industry/Drive/Commitment/Attitude</td>
<td>39.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Alignment/Values Fit</td>
<td>30.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Qualifications</td>
<td>28.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork Skills</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Intelligence (including self-awareness, strength of character, confidence, motivation)</td>
<td>18.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Experience</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities - includes both intra and extra curricular</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Skills</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two attributes identified here which haven't been previously mentioned are Activities and Cultural Alignment/Values Fit, both of which could be seen as
personal attributes, but draw heavily on the graduate’s commitment to workplace.

Flinders University has undertaken two comprehensive surveys of graduate employers, with the most recent revealing that the top three valued graduate attributes were “capacity for cooperation and teamwork”, “communication/presentation skills” and “capacity to learn new skills and procedures” (DEST, 2002). It also found that private sector employers were inclined to value “time management”, and “capacity to work with minimum supervision” more highly than were public sector employers (DEST, 2002).

Finally, the University of Canberra also conducted two surveys into employer satisfaction with university graduates and identified the five most important attributes as:

1. Being able to communicate effectively (generic)
2. Being flexible and adaptable (personal)
3. A commitment to ethical practice (personal)
4. Being willing to face and learn from errors and listen openly to feedback (personal)
5. Being able to organise work and manage time effectively (generic).

This study also found a significant gap between what attributes a graduate develops at university and the expectations the industry had of that graduate (Shah, 2011). Of the five high importance capabilities mentioned above, employers ranked four relatively low in terms of performance. They were:

1. Being able to communicate effectively
2. Being able to organise work and manage time effectively
3. Being willing to face and learn from errors and listen openly to feedback
4. Being flexible and adaptable.

Thus, while there is a clear trend across a majority of the literature that puts generic and personal skills above job-specific when it comes to employer satisfaction, university educators still need to do more to help students develop these attributes.

2.5 Curriculum development

Drawing on internal research and the wealth of knowledge available to them, Australian universities are now starting to incorporate graduate employability skills into their curriculum frameworks. Curtin University released its Graduate Attributes Policy in 2006, outlining nine key skills which students are expected to acquire through the course of their studies. They span all three categories mentioned above and include the ability to:

1. Apply discipline knowledge, principles and concepts;
2. Think critically, creatively and reflectively;
3. Access, evaluate and synthesise information;
4. Communicate effectively;
5. Use technologies appropriately;
6. Utilise lifelong learning skills;
7. Recognise and apply international perspectives;
8. Demonstrate cultural awareness and understanding; and
9. Apply professional skills.

In addition, Curtin emphasises three main aspects of curriculum (known as the triple-i), which contribute to its students’ overall development:

- Industry – working towards graduate employability
- Indigenous, intercultural, international – fostering global citizenship
- Interdisciplinary – providing rich educational choices.

These skills and attributes are all explicitly communicated in course and unit outlines, thus providing students with a solid employability framework which they will carry with them throughout their careers.

As part of its 2010 curriculum, Curtin built an e-portfolio system (called iPortfolio) for implementation across the university. According to a report by Curtin Professor Beverley Oliver, the iPortfolio has a My Ratings tab that enables the owner to assess themselves against each of Curtin’s graduate attributes, and invite feedback from peers, employers and teaching staff in relation to their assessment (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2010). This is one example of how universities are working to evaluate student attainment of employability attributes.

It is also important to mention here the nationally recognised Graduate Employability Indicators, which are designed to supplement the Australian Graduate Survey and provide more comprehensive graduate employability data from a broader range of stakeholders at course level (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2010). They account not only for employer views of the graduate, but also the graduate’s view of their coursework and the course teachers’ view of the graduate in learning. The 14 indicators draw from generic and personal attributes, and include:

1. Acquiring work-related knowledge and skills
2. Writing clearly and effectively
3. Speaking clearly and effectively
4. Thinking critically and analytically
5. Analysing quantitative problems
6. Using computing and information technology
7. Working effectively with others
8. Learning effectively on your own
9. Understanding people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds
10. Solving complex, real world problems
11. Developing a personal code of values and ethics
12. Contributing to the welfare of your community
13. Developing general industry awareness
14. Understanding different social contexts.

It is intended that these 14 indicators will be used in various university surveys (including the one commissioned for this project) to gather the perceptions of graduates, employers and course teaching teams (as mentioned above) in relation to the education, assessment, achievement and importance of employability skills in specific courses (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2010).

3. Industry forecasts

3.1 Projected areas of employment growth

The aim of Curtin’s Professional Writing and Publishing program is to prepare graduates for the new world of work, where research, writing, editing and publishing skills are highly desirable. As members of the public demand more information and better communications strategies from government, corporate bodies and community groups, these organisations in turn require staff to demonstrate specialised writing skills to convey their message to diverse audiences.

Research by Monash University commissioned by the Australian Government and publicly available via joboutlook.gov.au provides extensive data on the job prospects and skill requirements for a range of occupations. More specifically, it shows that over the next five years, the demand for:

- authors, book and script editors is likely to ‘grow moderately’;
- policy analysts is likely to ‘grow very strongly’;
- public relations professionals is likely to ‘remain relatively steady’; and
- journalists and other writers is likely to ‘decline’.

It’s important note here that the mix of industries employing journalists and other writers (which includes copywriters and technical writers) is favourable for employment growth prospects (Job Outlook, 2010), despite the likelihood of an immediate decline.

Recently, the Australian newspaper reported that job opportunities for all graduates increased from 2009 to 2010 and is likely to increase further this year and the next as Australian companies emerge from the global financial crisis with renewed confidence (McLeod, 2011). Citing data from the Graduate Outlook Survey, it reveals employers recruiting graduates in Australia and New Zealand increased from 88 percent in 2009 to 92 percent last year (McLeod, 2011).

Other useful information regarding employment forecasts specifically for professional writers and publishers comes from the Bureau of Labor Statistics in the United States (2010). The following is a summation of relevant findings:
• Employment in salaried writing and editing positions is expected to increase slightly from 2008 to 2018 as jobs become more prevalent throughout the economy.
• Companies in a wide array of industries are using newer multimedia technologies and online media to reach a more technology friendly consumer and meet the growing demand for Web-based information.
• Online publications and services are growing in number and sophistication, spurring the demand for authors, writers, and editors, especially those with Web or multimedia experience.
• Competition for jobs with established newspapers and magazines will be particularly keen as many organisations move their publication focus from a print to an online presence and as the publishing industry continues to contract.
• Writers and editors who have adapted to the new media and are comfortable writing for and working with a variety of electronic and digital tools will have an advantage in finding new work.

It is likely that the Australian writing and publishing industry will see similar trends to those predicted in the United States.

3.2 New and multi-faceted communications roles

The rapid development of new digital media has opened up opportunities to transform a maturing field of scholarly study and professional practice (Gauntlett, 2000). This is particularly true in the disciplines of professional writing, publishing and communications, which are seeing employment markets and positions increasingly fragment and change. The rise of new jobs such as digital communications strategist, web copywriter, online marketing coordinator, online editor and digital audience developer indicate both an increase in opportunities for professional communicators and changes to traditional job requirements.

Social media for example has had a particularly significant impact on the practice of public relations, many of the job-specific skills for which are taught in Curtin’s Professional Writing and Publishing Program. A recent study by the University of Technology, Sydney found all communications and public relations specialists surveyed used social networks and blogs in their practice, and around half used microblogging (ie. sites like Twitter), video sharing sites, and photo sharing sites (Macnamara, 2009, p. 31). In discussions and comments, practitioners cited “creating conversations”, “dialogue”, “engaging stakeholders”, “listening” and “building community” as important aspects of using social media (Macnamara, 2009, p. 33). Public relations and communications employees are therefore increasingly required to have specific knowledge when it comes to using social media for professional purposes.

It is important to note here that the study found views were mixed on whether organisations and agencies should appoint social media specialists, largely because of the highly confident air expressed by PR practitioners when it came to their knowledge and understanding of social media (Macnamara, 2009, p. 31).
It is not clear whether this is because employees were provided with specific social media training in their undergraduate degrees or because they picked up the knowledge from frequently using the forums in their daily lives.

A decline in the employment of desktop publishers and graphic designers due to greater accessibility of program software indicates new responsibilities for the professional communicator. It’s also true that fewer organisations are outsourcing their publications to typesetters and printers, thus requiring communications staff to take on more specialised publishing roles in house. Increasingly, companies are calling on these practitioners to take photographs for their internal communications as well.

There is further evidence reflected in other professional writing and publishing programs to suggest employers are demanding more specific digital media and publishing technology skills from graduates. Monash University for example requires its students to develop a critical awareness of electronic publishing and multimedia and an understanding of the enduring role of text in electronic media. There are also institutions such as the Australian College of Publishing that teach its students basic page layout skills with widely-used programs such as Adobe InDesign.

4. Conclusion

While there is no specific literature available on employer expectations of professional writing and publishing graduates, the wealth of information on generic skills and personal attributes which contribute to an individual’s employability provides a solid starting point for further research into the field. Given the practice-based nature of Curtin’s Professional Writing and Publishing program, and some of the important generic skills it already fosters (such as communication, teamwork and leadership), there is clearly scope for the course to produce increasingly employable graduates across all areas of discipline.

Useful points for interview-based qualitative research include the specific technical skills a PWP graduate is expected to have, how the generic skills are most applicable to professional practice, the role social media is having on new and existing jobs and where employment growth is expected to occur.

5. Works cited


Appendix B
Employer expectations of Professional Writing and Publishing graduates:
Interview summary

Interviews & Report: Nathan Scolaro
Project Manager: Rachel Robertson
June 9, 2011
1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose of research

This interview summary is part of a three-stage research process about the employability of Curtin’s Professional Writing and Publishing (PWP) graduates, which will culminate in the form of a final report. From these interviews, we sought to gain a closer insight into the professional practice of communications across a range of small to medium, not-for-profit and big industry employers, and determine what skills the team managers personally value in graduates and entry-level employees. More specifically, we wanted to know: what technical skills a PWP graduate is expected to have, how generic skills are most applicable to professional practice, the role social media is having on new and existing jobs and whether or not employment growth is likely to occur.

1.2 Employers interviewed

Eight interviews were conducted in total, including employers from the Heart Foundation (HF), Department of Education and Training (DET), Perth Zoo (ZOO), Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC), BHP Billiton (BHP), Scoop Publishing (SCOOP), City of Armadale (COA), and Fremantle Press (FP). Two interviewees worked in community services and development (BHP & COA), and the rest were from marketing, communications and/or publishing.

It is important to note that a number of these employers have taken on PWP students in both work placement and graduate roles over the past five years. These include the Perth Zoo (work placement and graduate on contract), BHP Billiton (work placement), Fremantle Press (graduate), Scoop Publishing (work placement and graduate), and the City of Armadale (work placement).

2. Employability of PWP graduates

2.1 Most valued skills and attributes

DEC: Copy editing and proofreading is the most important skill practised here. We want our communications staff to read for clarity, sense of purpose, grammar, spelling and alignment to the department’s brand.

FP: As well as editorial ability and high-level literacy skills, we look for graduates who are actively involved in the writing and publishing scene – who have worked on the local university mag, participated in workshops and love to read.

FP: You also need a high boredom threshold and good attention to detail skills, so you’re equipped to read the same thing in great detail over and over. We want people who can plot through tasks methodically.

BHP: They’ve got to have the capacity to think outside the square. Our business is very demanding in terms of compliance and governance. You’ve got to be
thinking about how to meet stakeholder requirements, not just the organisation you're answering to but the partner you're dealing with, the community you're dealing with. Certainly, the bigger the company, the greyer some of the areas are.

DET: Creative and lateral thinking skills are really important. You've got to think differently, especially in the cluttered world we live in – you're not going to get your message across unless you're thinking differently. That means asking yourself, 'should I Tweet this rather than putting out a media statement?' It's thinking through the advantages and disadvantages of different tools.

ZOO: Analysis skills are really important – being able to take large amounts of researched information and science jargon and make them accessible to a general audience.

HF: Willingness to learn and take direction is the thing we look for most. When you've come straight out of university, you may be a very good writer and have got top marks for your assignments, but how you apply that in the workplace is often quite different. It's about being willing to take direction and open to having work heavily edited initially.

COA: We want people to be flexible and proactive, who can recognise opportunities, read situations and are easy to get along with.

SCOOP: Creativity, integrity and excellent written communication skills is what we're looking for. The best writing is that which demonstrates original ideas, humour, thoughtfulness and a nice turn of phrase.

2.2 Skills and attributes lacking

DEC: Graduates tend to struggle the most being comfortable in the office environment – making phone calls, for example (especially to carry out quite involved interviews and gather information), interacting with senior staff also.

DEC: There seems to be a lack of understanding around the complexity of government departments and the work they do.

BHP: We've noticed a tendency in the young people coming through to hide behind the computer and write an email to make contact rather than pick up the phone or arrange a face-to-face. In terms of communication, it's critical – particularly in community relations – to really engage with an individual rather than send an email.

DET: Writing skills more and more. It's one of the poorest things I keep coming across. They're missing their sense of audience, their sense of purpose when they write. They need to know that the basis of whatever they do is persuasive writing. In my team of 25, I would have less than four really strong writers.

DET: What also strikes me is that graduates don't understand the power of one really good strategy. They respond to a scenario on a wide range of different
fronts, and to really high budgets. There’s no sense around the reality of what could be done within a budget and a timeframe.

DET: There is also this sense that people don’t know how to operate in a professional working environment. I’ve had some graduates who don’t dress appropriately, they don’t act appropriately.

ZOO: We had one student on placement who had a tendency to rewrite information that was already there. She didn’t have a strong sense or appreciation that she was creating something new. Her approach was that ‘okay, I’m here to do a university assignment so I can look at all the sources and transfer the information to what I’m doing.’ Missing the initiative and analytical skills.

HF: Basic spelling and grammar skills seem to be lacking in a lot of young writing students that come through here.

SCOOP: The main area we see placement students and new employees struggle is with oral communications issues – things like making phone calls and conducting interviews. This seems to be a confidence issue.

SCOOP: The other is editing. Often work experience students have trouble distinguishing between what information is worth keeping or removing from an article. They tend to cut all the ‘colour’ from an article, and leave the dull details. This might work well for hard news, but it’s not what we look for at Scoop.

2.3 Job-specific skills required

DEC: Staff with an understanding of social media and how it can be used will be increasingly valued and sought after here.

DEC: Desktop publishing skills would be useful, but traits such as attention to detail, care and consistency in written work, and the ability to pick up new skills are just as important. Training can be provided for some of those job-specific skills like desktop publishing.

FP: A familiarity with InDesign certainly helps. Often we might be called on to manipulate the typeset for last minute editorial decisions, which is where that knowledge would certainly come in handy. When a reprint comes in, someone might be called on to help work with the design of that reprint.

FP: Writing a business letter is a skill that needs to be learned in context – high-level literacy is important here. Need to be able to extract information from research and conversation, create a tone in the writing, and still get the message across.

DET: People need the skills to know what is good design, visually, but they shouldn’t be required to do it I think. The important thing is giving a really good brief and understanding if that brief has been creatively realised.
ZOO: Photo editing skills and uploading web content are important, some of the basic desktop publishing skills are valuable too. Many people don’t know that photos which are 200k are absolutely useless for print publication. What does high/low resolution mean? - These kinds of things would be good for them to know.

ZOO: Understanding what makes a good E-newsletter, a good website. Having those visual skills in an online capacity is important. To know that it's not just about the words, it's the way they're packaged visually as well.

COA: Writing grant submissions – knowing what it should look like and how to distill all the information into an argument. Having the confidence to meet with funding bodies, get a good sense of the outcomes and ensure they're all in line with your own, and then using this to make a compelling case.

SCOOP: Knowledge of InDesign is a plus – often writers are required to cut and shape text into pages, and proof their work on the page, which requires a good understanding of the program and appreciation for the graphic designer's skill.

ALL: Press releases, speeches, reports, TV/radio news pieces, formal response emails, Twitter and Facebook updates, blog entries, web articles, news articles, feature articles, book blurbs, grant applications, grant submissions, brochures, educational resources, advertising material, signage and journal articles.

2.4  How generic skills are practised in a communications context

DET: Most of the things we do, we’re working on 10 or 12 different fronts at a time – if you’re doing a major campaign, you’ll be doing online, outdoor, events, public relations, advertising, stakeholder and internal communications. You need the skills to project manage all that.

COA: We have a communications manager who has to work with the entire organisation so she needs fantastic interpersonal skills for a start. Walking into an interview with confidence so the folks on the other side of the desk can see she knows her stuff. Getting involved in initiatives, things she doesn't know much about, extracting the information and writing media releases or articles or preparing communication strategies on particular issues.

FP: Good people management skills – every book brings a string of relationships, and it’s the ability to listen to people and work through the project in a calm and productive way that gets the best results.

ZOO: Interpersonal skills and teamwork are paramount. It’s a very connected workplace – the graphic designers and marketing and communications workers service everyone. You need to ensure everyone’s on the same page, focused on the same outcome so the target audience receives the information in the best way possible. It also helps to have a good rapport with everyone in the team so if
communications need some information from the keeping staff, for example, it will be a lot easier.

ZOO: Networking externally as well. If you're on good terms with someone at the newspaper, and there's some last minute advertising/editorial space – they'll call marketing at zoo up and offer him or her a half price deal to get it in.

HF: Teamwork is really important because often we'll have to spend a lot of time with other people in the organisation, getting our heads around what a particular campaign is about. We need to research and understand it, and then write media releases about it confidently for specific audiences. It's about getting to the heart of the message.

SCOOP: Self-management and personal organisation skills are vital, as writers might be working to a number of deadlines at any given time. How you go about completing a story is quite an autonomous process, so being able to prioritise is important.

3. Roles and expectations of the professional writer and communicator

3.1 Types of writing

DEC: Some of the tasks a communications graduate might be expected to take on include interviewing a DEC staff member about a project or event, or receiving rough notes and dot points about a topic, and working the information into a press release or brief article (300-400 words) in a set style.

DEC: Researching and writing long feature articles (2000 words) for our quarterly publication, LANDSCOPE magazine, which requires working with DEC scientists or specialist staff.

FP: Tasks are wide-ranging and include manuscript assessment, writing copy for marketing, writing business letters, writing blurbs and general administration.

FP: Another task might be providing a readers’ report, which requires high-level analytical and writing skills. Basically one looks into all the contextual factors that might be drawn on in the reading of a book prior to publication - to get a sense of who will read it, how it might be interpreted, and to ensure it’s not offensive or discriminatory.

BHP: Work mainly revolves around briefs which indicate the type of writing – press release, article or news piece; what kind of publication – journal or internal magazine; deadline; and target audience.

BHP: There is also some advertising and promotional writing which involves working closely with the graphic designer, and understanding the capacity of
their role to create something that’s visually effective with appropriate messaging.

DET: The press release has a standardised template, for government at least. As does a good memo to staff. There’s structure to these different forms. The most challenging part is working out what your key messages and facts are. Once you have that, combine it with your knowledge of the audience and purpose of the writing, and it should all fall into place.

ZOO: Magazine articles (300-2000 words), writing for Twitter or Facebook (snappy, more of a news service), interpretation (signage for exhibitions, which has a researched philosophy behind it – a formula/style), press releases, advertising material, report writing, grant applications, speech writing, website content (not all that different to magazines), articles for journals and educational resources.

HF: We practise both reactive and proactive communications. Proactive in that we send out information (press releases, articles) and give journalists information programs that we want to publicise, and reactive in that we respond to issues about heart health that arise in the debate. We wouldn’t be expected to have the knowledge as communications staff; we’d put them in touch with someone in the organisation who has the expertise. So it’s being aware what specialised heart knowledge each member of our team has.

HF: Sometimes we’ll write short snippets for TV or radio around one of the campaigns.

COA: We look at report writing to council, submissions for awards, which are very important because they raise our credibility and potential for funding services, and grant submissions. These may sound a bit dry but they’re your argument, so the more compelling and compassionate you can be in your writing, as well as factual, the better the outcome.

SCOOP: Feature writing 1500-3000 words, profiles of up to 2000 words, arts, style and entertainment listings 50-200 words, and travel stories are the main kinds of writing we do here.

3.2 Research, proofreading and editing tasks

DEC: Editing text for brochures, reports or other external publications before design occurs. Tracking changes in the Word document, then liaising with the client about the changes to determine the ‘final’ text.

BHP: The research behind the article or internal newsletter is a big part of it – understanding the programs that our partners are running and putting it together with compliance to BHP’s and the stakeholder’s branding.

HF: Other people in the organisation write the reports, and our job is to extract the information from them and make them more accessible to the general public.
Turning dry statistics into something that’s quite interesting is important – this requires good analysis skills.

SCOOP: The process begins with coming up with a story idea – using all your sources and knowledge of the area you’re writing about and doing something creative with that. Then there’s tracking down the right folks to interview, interviewing them, writing the story, proofreading your work, sending to editors and then sub-editors, having the story laid out by the graphic designer and then reading it again for grammar/spelling/house style on the proofs before it goes to print.

FP: The best proofreaders are the ones who say ‘do you realise the word ‘anguish’ has appeared five times in the novel – was that intended?’ It’s about being an intelligent reader, a meticulous reader.

3.2 Other roles

BHP: Event management skills and stakeholder relations are readily performed in this department. A lot of the work is managing teams – a film crew, for example, working on a commercial or photographer and stylist for a photoshoot.

BHP: In the communications team, a lot of media monitoring goes on; keeping track of what articles about BHP are released to the public and then analysing and distilling the key points to feed back to management.

ZOO: Taking photos, working a camera, making films, uploading web content, and using editing software are some of the other things I do.

HF: We would brief the spokesperson too – for example, the journalist might be writing a general story about children and exercise, and it would be our job to go through the points about what the foundation is doing in that area across the board.

SCOOP: Graduates would be expected to coordinate editorial copy and artwork, pitch ideas across all our travel, design and lifestyle magazines, upload web content and perform general office maintenance outside of the writing tasks.

DEC: Copy fitting so working bigger amounts of text down to fit a space.

4. Online communications

4.1 Professional practice

DEC: DEC has a daily staff news item online – the front page of their intranet – and one of the main communications roles in the branch is preparing and managing content for this. It involves interviewing, writing, summarising and editing content, seeking approvals and uploading articles.
FP: Writing and uploading website content, classification of E-books, blogging. Requires a good sense of audience and creativity skills.

DET: Strategically there’s nothing different about working online; it’s a different medium but we already operate in many different mediums. It’s about understanding how you write and communicate in that medium.

HF: We compile and write articles for the Internal E-Newsletters. The writing is not too different from a press release or normal article; often just shorter, more summarised versions. People within the organisation will have written something to go on the website and we’ll edit that over, make it a bit sharper and shorter to get the point across.

COA: We have an extranet with a youth-based network of organisations that deliver services for young people in the area – that’s a professional networking forum so the ability to administer and input into that would be an advantage.

SCOOP: All our feature articles go onto the web as they are, the only writing we do specifically for online is advertorial and events listings.

4.2 Role of social media

DEC: DEC is on Facebook and Twitter and we have recently established a new position within corporate communications for a web communications officer. A social media policy with guidelines for staff has been developed and we are increasingly using the technology to engage public.

FP: There seems to be a disconnect between what graduates know and what they say they know. Because skills like Facebooking and Twittering are so readily practised these days, they don’t think to use them to their advantage when applying for jobs.

DET: The challenge of social media is that it’s two-way. We’ve been so used to putting out a press statement and that’s it. As soon as you go onto Twitter or Facebook, the receiver can respond to what you’re communicating and so you have to be prepared to engage with them on that level.

ZOO: We use Twitter and Facebook to give news updates about what we’re doing and also to reference an article on the web or a film on YouTube.

HF: We maintain a Facebook page here, which involves distilling the message into one paragraph – usually alerting people to something we’ve got going on and pointing them to more information on the website.

SCOOP: Scoop has a website and Facebook page. I think the influence of social media is only going to grow in the future, and employees will probably need to be proficient using whatever social media is popular at any given time. In this respect, adaptability is an asset.
5. Industry forecasts

5.1 Projected areas of employment growth

FP: Little employment growth, we need people more than we have the capacity to take them on. Freelancing is a more immediate way of entering the industry because things change frequently. I would suggest graduates update Fremantle Press with what they’re doing, making themselves known, following through with CV updates, and keeping themselves fresh in our minds.

BHP: Not a lot of foreseeable job growth in the team. A lot of the main communications projects and campaigns are outsourced – it is up to the team to initiate, manage and drive them home.

DET: We did have a position dedicated to social media, because just trying to get your head around it – the technology, the policies and the rapidly changing nature of it all, required a whole new staff member. And I wanted to use that person to then skill up our other staff. But funding issues meant she was the first to go.

COA: 80 per cent of population growth in Australia is going to happen in the outer metropolitan areas like Armadale. So these organisations are going to grow. There are going to be a lot of people moving into the area, so there’s going to be an ongoing need for good communicators - to make cases for funding for our residents.

SCOOP: We are in the process of employing a junior editorial assistant– but roles like this are rarely advertised, and not likely to come up again for at least another year or two.

5.2 Changing nature of communications roles

DEC: Communications positions are likely to become more diverse – for example, writing skills will be needed for print and electronic publications, as well as for web content.

COA: There will be a greater focus on expanding interests and niche writers. So someone who specialises in community sport would have a strong interest and flair for writing about it. Same as Indigenous affairs.

SCOOP: The main changes we’ll see are writing articles for online, and directing attention to these stories through Facebook.

FP: Be ready for anything and everything. People need to handle stress and not drop their shoulders when things go wrong. New technologies are changing the way we work. You’ve got to keep up with that and retain your clear sightedness.
6. Suggestions for the PWP program

6.1 Resources

FP: In terms of a style guide, we use the Style Manual (6th edition – Australian Government Publishing) as our main source, our Bible. I would strongly recommend students read it cover to cover. Then we have our Freo Press house style, as well as individual books sheets. Macquarie Dictionary for spelling.

ZOO: We use Vegas Movie Maker to put together our videos for YouTube and InDesign for our publications.

ALL: Seem to use InDesign for their publications.

6.2 Teaching

BHP: The communications here are strictly governed, there’s a whole set of guidelines and procedures that inform the content of media releases and articles to ensure strict alliance to messaging and branding. Important to keep this in mind for student assignments.

DET: Universities need to put the parameters around social media for students – because they’re so used to Facebooking whatever they think. That doesn’t work in a professional context – they need to know how these technologies are used for professional marketing and communications and in what framework.

COA: What I’ve observed of PWP students is that people have a strong idea of what their passion is – to which writing becomes the tool. So people with a passion and the writing skills have a very good grounding for a position. That’s exactly what we want to see. People with the skills have to work out what their passion and area of interests are; the two make for a great combination.

COA: Making students aware that they have a whole set of transferable skills from sporting groups, church groups, work experience – they should seize these and take them into their job interview with their formal qualifications.

FP: I think tutors and lecturers should help students recognise their own skills and channel them effectively. You may have a love of books but your editorial abilities may not be that great – so perhaps marketing the book might be a more appropriate path to take.

6.3 Other

FP: There is also the capacity to employ freelance editors, which is dependent on a strong track record and accreditation with the Australian Institute of Editors – being a member of that society and sitting the exam I would say are good steps post university for editors and publishers. We would look at that favourably because it shows dedication.
FP: One of the best students came from Curtin editing and did a year’s experience volunteering on dotdotdash magazine, did everything in her capacity to get good publishing experience, kept in touch with us and eventually got a job.

DET: A stand out graduate for me was a girl who, in her first job to write a media statement, came back with something that she thought was appropriate for *The West Australian*, for the community newspapers and for the radio. Something for online could be good now too.

BHP: One of our best placements came from Curtin Professional Writing and her job was to curate an entire Aboriginal art exhibition, working with remote Indigenous community artists to learn the stories and retell it through a brochure and hanging of artworks.

7. Appendix

7.1 Names and contacts of interviewees

BHP Billiton
Louanne Munz: Principal Community Coordinator
Louanne.munz@bhpbilliton.com
(08) 6274 1197

Department of Education and Training
Jane Machin-Everill: Director Corporate Communications and Marketing
Jane.Machin-Everill@det.wa.edu.au
(08) 9264 4855

Heart Foundation
Sandy Oliver: Manager Media and Communications
Sandy.Oliver@heartfoundation.org.au
(08) 9382 5947

Scoop Publishing
Jessica Matthews: Staff Writer
jessica@scoop.com.au
(08) 9388 8188

Department of Environment and Conservation
Joanna Moore: Senior Project Officer - Communication
Joanna.Moore@dec.wa.gov.au
(08) 9389 4009

Perth Zoo
Daniel Scarparolo: Communications and Interpretation Officer Daniel.Scarparolo@perthzoo.wa.gov.au
Julie-Anne Smith: Education Manager