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# Student responses to a new project model capstone unit in journalism

## ABSTRACT

*Tertiary educators across the globe are trying to identify the best way for students to complete their studies in a unit that synthesizes learning to date and prepares them to enter the workforce. The final unit, or capstone, has increasingly emerged as a key issue in higher education in recent years, and is the subject of a growing body of research. However, researchers have not reached consensus about the most suitable model for a capstone unit. The absence of a uniform approach is pronounced within the field of journalism education, where capstone units are not universal and a number of models are being used. In Australia, research has found that most undergraduate journalism programmes include a capstone unit, but that there are three models: the internship, the newsroom simulation and the project. The aim here is not to argue that one model is more effective than and preferable to others. Instead, this study contributes to the capstone literature by outlining student responses to a new project model capstone unit for journalism undergraduates at a Western Australian university. It evaluates the unit's effectiveness against the stated purposes and principles of a capstone experience, and concludes that the project can achieve the dual aims of enhancing disciplinary skills and developing broader transferable abilities.*

## KEYWORDS

capstone  
project  
journalism education  
employability  
transferable skills  
learning outcomes  
tertiary sector  
university graduates

## Introduction

Embedding capstone units in undergraduate degrees and majors gains importance and momentum when one considers two major reports in 2018 and 2019 on the changing world of work for graduates. The first, *The New Work Reality Report* (2018), was published by the Foundation for Young Australians (FYA), and is part of a series of reports that started in 2015 on the new world of work. The 2018 report describes the transition for graduates between full-time education and full-time work as increasingly uncertain. Digital disruption, demographic shifts and changing employer expectations are stated as some of the forces that have a significant impact on the way graduates work. Currently, the average work tenure is roughly three years. Assuming this continues, a graduate could have more than fifteen employers in their lifetime. They are also likely to have several different careers during this time. The report reveals that by the age of 25, only half of young Australians have been able to secure more than 35 hours of work per week (Foundation for Young Australians 2018: 7). Also, as accelerating digital change increases, graduates will need different skills such as mental and practical tools for fast-changing careers in the gig economy, where a full-time, long-term job is no longer a reality. The report highlights key factors which can assist the transition from tertiary education to full-time work, that is, an education that builds transferable skills such as problem-solving, communication and teamwork.

The second report, AlphaBeta's *Future Skills Report*, published in 2018 and commissioned by Google, studied changes in more than 300 jobs, especially the tasks they involved and the skills required to do them. It found the most valuable workplace skills to be uniquely human traits such as adaptability, teamwork, creativity and leadership. These need to be supported by a broad foundation of skills required to perform a specific task. Graduates will need not only more developed human traits: they will also need to adapt more quickly to changes to their jobs and the tasks these involve. These findings are supported by previous reports on the future of work. For example, in 2016, the World Economic Forum (WEF) stated that in the past 25 years, Australia had lost one million jobs in both manufacturing and administration, but more than one million jobs had been added to the knowledge and service industries (WEF 2016). These findings do not imply that there will be fewer jobs in the future, but rather that there will be different and varied ones. The consequences of the new world of work mean graduates will experience many changing roles throughout their careers and will need a variety of skills to respond.

Few industries have been more affected by digitization and changing employer expectations than journalism. The changes to both journalism practice and the media industry pose significant challenges for journalism educators, as described by Wenger et al. (2018):

[...] although the core principles of relevance, accuracy, and timeliness have remained, when it comes to the presentation of news, journalism has been completely deconstructed. The required skill sets for those working in journalism are continually expanding as technology advances and news consumption preferences evolve. In addition, the range of journalism graduates' career prospects is significantly more diverse than the range of paths encompassed by the usual meanings of 'journalism' work. Ultimately, it is hard to know what to teach and how to teach it when those goals are a moving target.

(2018: 19)

These sentiments are echoed by St Clair (2015), who argues that journalism is changing faster than any university curricula. Hence, journalism graduates need to be 'flexible, innovative and enterprising to survive professionally in this evolving setting' (St Clair 2015: 122). This is recognized by journalism educators in Australia, who are adapting their teaching and curricula in response. As part of these efforts, most Australian undergraduate journalism courses include a capstone unit designed to guide students through the transition from university to workplace. Three capstone models are being used: internship, newsroom simulation and project. The internship is the most common, although some educators are unsure about its suitability as a culminating unit. Most educators see merit in the project model, yet it is not widely used (Cullen 2017). To date, there has been a lack of research about how journalism students respond to the various capstone options. The study presented here makes a contribution to this field by describing graduating students' feedback in response to a new project model capstone unit offered at Curtin University in Western Australia in 2018. It was guided by the following research question: Do initial student responses to the Journalism Major Project unit indicate that it meets the key objectives of a successful tertiary capstone experience? The capstone objectives are outlined in more detail below.

### **What are capstone units?**

Capstones are substantial learning experiences that take place in the final stage of an educational course, offering closure and a focus for the sense of achievement that comes with completion. Capstones are the culminating experiences for undergraduate degrees, and they serve a long list of functions. They provide students with the context in which to integrate and apply prior learning, provide depth and complexity, engender independence and confidence, and orient and assist in transition to life after graduation. They are special, significant, challenging and exciting. Increasingly, they are also conceptualized as the key location for identifying whether students can demonstrate the achievement of many, if not all, degree programme learning outcomes (Lee and Loton 2015).

Six common capstone models have been identified across disciplines: externally oriented projects; academic inquiry projects; practice-oriented simulations; practice-based consultancies; task-oriented simulations; and professional placements (Lee 2015). Reviews of the capstone literature have found that the two project models are dominant (Hauhart and Grahe 2015), and are said to comprise up to 85 per cent of all capstones (Lee and Loton 2015). Externally oriented projects, also known as problem-based projects, typically give students the opportunity to engage in a professional project whereby they develop a solution for an external client, who may be real or imagined. Assessments usually take the form of presentations and reports which may be delivered to the client. Academic inquiry projects are similar to Honours projects and may take the form of a major creative or professional piece or a substantial research dissertation (Lee 2015).

Capstones are generally adapted to meet the specific needs of graduating students and can vary significantly across disciplines. Lee and Loton (2015) note that while the capstone curriculum has become increasingly important in Australia to assess discipline standards and Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) levels, curriculum approaches and learning and assessment activities are increasingly diverse. This view is also supported by other researchers. 'There is a clear need for the capstone experience to be tailored

suitably to student and workplace needs, and that if effectively designed, capstone units can improve students' learning and experience and enhance graduate employability' (Thomas et al. 2014: 585).

However, numerous researchers have cautioned against a focus on preparing students to be job-ready. For example, Ivison (2015) argues that the uncertainty of the future should not be used to reduce the importance of disciplinary depth as well as a broad range of generic capabilities. A focus on narrow occupational competencies will not serve students well: '[r]emember that university is not a job training centre and that graduates could be left with a huge dose of career paranoia' (Ivison 2015). Bennett (2018), an expert on student employability, contends that while the question of how to prepare higher education students for employment is at the forefront of higher education, it is, in many respects, the wrong question: 'Pose an alternative question: how might we prepare higher education students to navigate an increasingly complex world and labor market in which they will need to think for a living?' (Bennett 2018: 50). Also, if we are to educate for employability (growing abilities) rather than employment (securing a job), then the concern for educators is to move beyond graduate employment to focus on the development of graduates who are prepared to meet the demands of life and work well beyond their discipline. Employability must focus on ability, so graduates are not only ready for work, but also for lifelong learning and a life of jobs (Bennett 2018). This approach is supported by other researchers. 'The uses and definitions of employability must distinguish between job-getting (employment) and the ability to create and sustain work overtime (employability): between "being employable or not, to a consideration of employability as having a dynamic adaptive nature"' (Williams et al. 2016: 877).

## Journalism capstone units

Capstone units are the desired structure among journalism educators in Australia, especially in helping graduates transition from university to professional life with appropriate knowledge and skills. Currently, 30 universities in Australia teach journalism and two thirds of them (twenty universities) use at least one journalism capstone unit in their undergraduate programmes. These facts emerged from the findings of an eighteen-month government-sponsored Australian National Teaching Fellowship study that reviewed undergraduate capstone units embedded in journalism degrees and majors in Australian universities (Cullen 2017). The study was conducted from late 2015 to early 2017, and involved face-to-face interviews with 30 journalism academics at eighteen universities in five states, to discover what types of capstone units they used, the principles they employed and the skills students needed to be able to demonstrate and apply. Findings from the study revealed that capstone units were in common use in eighteen out of 30 tertiary journalism programmes and that there were three types of third-year capstone units in use:

- newsroom simulation units,
- internships (often described as professional industry placement),
- a journalism project.

The majority of journalism educators in the study reported the use of one and often two (and sometimes three) types of capstone unit. The internship was the most popular, followed by newsroom simulation and then a project. The

internship usually consisted of a four-week full-time placement at a media organization. This involved consultation with the journalism coordinator about the suitability of the placement. High-performing students were commonly selected for internships rather than those who were average or struggling with the course. Several educators argued against using an internship as the only capstone unit as there was often little supervision and mentoring in the newsroom. Frequent discussions with students before, during and after the internship usually provided the most productive outcomes and experience (Cullen 2017). Previous research has also pointed to some limitations of the internship model. Journalism educators have reported that professional industry placements (PIPs) were problematic for testing graduate capabilities as not only were they decreasing in number, but students enrolled in PIPs did not necessarily have the required skills and often ended up performing menial tasks in the newsroom (Tanner et al. 2014). Forde and Meadows (2011) argue that student learning through PIPs is more complex and takes place at several levels: through workplace variability; through students' different and diverse internship experiences; and particularly through participation in a post-internship peer reflective session. However, Billett (2011), in his investigation into the curriculum and pedagogic bases for effectively integrating practice-based experiences, stresses the need to be clear about what needs to be learnt and to consider options other than supervised placements to secure intended educational purposes.

Another model – the newsroom simulation capstone – was popular with educators in the Cullen (2017) study as it allowed students to demonstrate what they had learnt during their three-year undergraduate programme. In this capstone, students assume different editorial and reporting roles and create a portfolio of published work and achievements. This is now a basic requirement when students apply for jobs at media organizations. According to educators, the newsroom simulation capstone encourages students to think and act like journalists and helps them to develop a confident and professional approach to their work. This model also allows educators to identify gaps in learning. However, newsroom simulation units can be resource-intensive and difficult to implement within the parameters of conventional tertiary learning activities.

The third type of journalism capstone unit involves a project, where students cover an event or a local social or political issue. Students are exposed to a wide range of journalistic skills including interviewing, writing, editing and keeping production deadlines. Reflective practice is considered a key part of the project, as it is through reflection that students become more aware and intentional about their own professional identities. Furthermore, reflective practice facilitates both personal and professional development by encouraging individuals to give thoughtful consideration to contexts, themselves and their roles. It contributes to the acquisition and development of higher-order cognitive skills such as critical thinking (Hovorka 2009). It is therefore crucial that capstone units provide opportunities for students to reflect on their learning, on the profession and on their future roles in order to develop their professional identities.

The next section focuses on a newly designed capstone unit offered at Curtin University. Journalism Major Project is a culmination of the journalism degree whereby students apply the skills and knowledge learnt over the course of their studies to produce a major journalism project or body of work. The unit was designed to allow students to use and enhance their journalism

disciplinary skills, but also to develop lifelong, transferable learning abilities and traits. The section below provides more information about the unit, followed by the results of a survey that asked students about their expectations and experience of the project capstone.

### The unit

Journalism Major Project was offered for the first time at Curtin in Semester 2, 2018. It was included in the journalism major as a compulsory third-year subject. The first group to take the unit comprised 35 students. Three staff members, each with a different area of expertise (writing, video or audio) shared the teaching. Unit development was guided by the Capstone Principles as outlined in the Australian Government's Office of Learning and Teaching website [capstonecurriculum.com.au](http://capstonecurriculum.com.au):

1. Integration and extension of prior learning;
2. Authentic and contextualized experiences;
3. Challenging and complex scenarios;
4. Student independence and agency;
5. A concern with critical inquiry and creativity;
6. Active dissemination and celebration.

Furthermore, unit design was influenced by research (Furston and Lee 2014; Schwering 2015) that has pointed to the advantages of the project model capstone. A critical element of the project model is the concept of 'ownership'. The students should feel that the project is entirely theirs – from conception to submission. Implicit in this approach is a focus on autonomy and independence. For this reason, a decision was made to allow flexibility around what a project might entail. The students were told that their project must be multi-media and should include input from a minimum of four sources. It was up to them to choose a topic and decide how to report on and present the story.

It was important that the assessment weighting reflected the expected workload associated with the project, so this was set at 60 per cent, and the project was due for submission at the end of the second-last week of the semester. However, there was also a need to ensure that students had a clear idea of what they planned to do for their project within a few weeks of the start of the semester. Hence, a presentation assessment worth 20 per cent was included. For this assessment, students presented to the class a detailed proposal for their project around mid-semester. As reflective practice is another key element of the project capstone approach, a reflective essay, also worth 20 per cent, was the final piece of assessment. The unit learning outcomes below outline what students were expected to do to successfully complete the unit:

1. Evaluate a variety of sources in order to identify and explore a focus for the project.
2. Gauge potential of the project, in terms of its feasibility and originality, and subsequently advocate its worth to audiences and publishers.
3. Produce a substantial piece of journalism that complies with legal, ethical and professional standards, and synthesizes complex ideas and information.
4. Critically explain and justify the approach to production process, reflecting upon the challenges and opportunities presented.

At the start of the semester, the students were introduced to the idea of a major project and were shown examples of projects within journalism. These ranged from prize-winning multimedia international projects such as The Harvest of Change series published in *The Des Moines Register* to projects produced by other Curtin students as part of a study tour to China, as well as examples of prize-winning work from the Australian student journalism awards, the Ossies. To give students more guidance around the process of producing a major piece of journalism, three local journalists visited the campus to speak to the students about a project they had worked on. The aim was to bring in journalists from different stages in their careers. The speakers included a recent graduate who had won WA Student Journalist of the Year the previous year, a local ABC journalist who spoke about her experience producing a *Foreign Correspondent* television package and the chief reporter for *The Australian's* Perth bureau.

In Week 1, the students were formed into groups of four or five people to work with throughout the semester to discuss ideas and progress and trouble-shoot issues that may arise. These groups played a particularly important role during Weeks 2–4 as students identified a topic for their project. Topic ideas were confirmed after consultation with teaching staff. Students presented their project proposals to staff and their peers in Weeks 6–8. During the rest of the semester, the unit included some structured teaching each week on topics such as writing, producing infographics, editing, design and layout. Students were also given time to work on their projects and seek feedback from staff and other students. The projects were submitted in the penultimate week of the semester so that the final class the following week could include a review of the semester and a showcase of some of the best projects. All of the projects were considered for publication on Curtin's news website, *Western Independent*, and the best of the work was subsequently displayed as part of a showcase for industry representatives, in line with the capstone principle of active dissemination and celebration.

## Results

Students were asked to complete a questionnaire via a Survey Monkey link at the start of the semester, and again in the last week of semester, after the projects had been submitted but before they had been marked. Each survey comprised ten questions. Some of the questions required students to provide a statement to expand on or support the quantitative answers they provided. Of the 35 students enrolled in the unit, 26 completed the first survey and 16 completed the second survey. The project was approved by the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee and all participants received an information sheet and signed a consent form before completing the survey. The consent form stipulated that all of the survey responses would be de-identified in any published material that resulted from the research. Students were encouraged to complete the survey, but participation was voluntary. It was unfortunate, but not unexpected, that the number of participants was not as high for the second survey. As most educators know, it can be difficult to get students to provide formal feedback, particularly at the end of semester when they often have a high assessment workload. However, while such feedback can be dominated by students at either end of the marking spectrum, in this case the students who completed the second survey represented the full range of the final marks.



For the first survey, the students were asked about their expectations of the unit, what specific journalism skills they wanted to improve through completing a major project, their experience of previous journalism units and their perceived preparedness to enter the workforce. They were also asked whether they planned to pursue a career in journalism. Of the 25 students who answered that question, eighteen said yes, four said no and three were unsure. For the later survey, the students were asked about their experience of producing the major project and about their preparedness to start their careers. They were asked about the skills they had developed throughout the unit and what they considered to be the best aspect of the unit overall. They were also asked to compare the project unit to other final-year units within the journalism major.

Overall, the response to the new unit was extremely positive. More than 90 per cent of the students who completed the second survey said they believed Journalism Major Project should be a compulsory unit in the journalism programme. When asked to nominate the model they considered the most appropriate capstone experience for journalism students, the majority of the students (60 per cent) chose project. This was followed by internship (25 per cent) and newsroom simulation experience (15 per cent). A clear majority of the students (81 per cent) said they were satisfied with their final project. A small number (12 per cent) were somewhat satisfied, while only one was not satisfied. This article will now focus on reporting the survey findings relating to the effectiveness of Journalism Major Project against the generally agreed purposes and principles of a capstone unit. The sub-headings below represent the most significant themes to emerge from the student responses.

### ***The challenge ahead***

When asked an open-ended question in the first survey about how they felt about producing a major journalism project of their own choice, 60 per cent of the students reported feeling nervous and/or daunted. Responses included 'mildly terrified', 'overwhelmed' and 'uneasy'. For some, the lack of direction was a problem, usually because they questioned their ability to come up with a strong idea:

I enjoy having freedom to choose but sometimes struggle to find ideas or I doubt my ideas are interesting or newsworthy.

Not 100% sure where to start and no specific guide means endless possibilities.

This initial uncertainty is common among students completing capstone units, according to Lee and Loton, who have stated that students often struggle with 'moving into independence and dealing with ambiguity during the first stages of capstone units' (2015: 10).

However, for some students undertaking Journalism Major Project, the freedom of being able to choose the topic and style of the project was highly appealing:

I love it. I'm not the greatest student. The regimented structure of academia isn't particularly suited to me, so the opportunity to sink my teeth into a story I want, in a way that I want, is fantastic.



Deciding on a project of my own choice is exciting as it will be a story I am hopefully very invested in and passionate about, and I find this very motivating.

A number of the students said they were looking forward to producing a significant piece of journalism over the course of a semester:

I am looking forward to pushing myself and focusing all of my energy on one project across the semester to get the most out of it. I am interested to see to what depth and detail I can get to with my story across a long period of time.

At the same time, many of them acknowledged that being given autonomy over their choices and total ownership of the project made the stakes higher. While this might mean they were more passionate about their work, it also meant they were more accountable, to themselves and others.

### ***Independence and agency***

While some students were initially unsure about the prospect of owning the project, and making all of the associated choices and decisions, the vast majority said they valued that experience by the end of the semester. Of the sixteen students who completed the second survey, 93 per cent said they appreciated the chance to choose their own topic and work independently. Only one said they did not. When asked, in a different question, about the best aspect of the unit, the most common answer was 'freedom'. A number of students talked about enjoying the freedom to be creative. They also noted that choosing the topic provided a particular connection to the story, and a sense of responsibility for it that enhanced the learning process.

If I was forced to write on a predetermined topic, I don't think I would have tackled the project with as much passion, and subsequently I don't think I would have learned as much. Good judgment comes from experience, and experience comes from poor judgment. We needed the opportunity to make poor decisions, whether that be through the topic we chose or through the process of writing the story – we needed the opportunity to fail completely in order to learn how to do it all properly.

Giving students the opportunity to work independently is critically important, according to Hauhart and Grahe (2015), who have devised recommendations for best practice in capstone design. They advise using the student choice model as it empowers and motivates students.

Many of the students in the Curtin journalism study commented on the fact that the autonomous nature of the project required them to be organized and disciplined, and to manage their time effectively. Most of them seemed ready to do so, and considered the development of these skills to be important to their future.

Working independently compelled us to be responsible for our own work and organisation – an important component of the future workforce – as well as allowing us to develop our planning and time management skills and learn the ways in which we best work.

There's definitely an element of being left to your own resources, and the fact there isn't any deadlines between submitting your timeline at the presentation and the final submission date is a really good concept. It means if you don't put the work in yourself, your work will be of a poor standard. It really feels like the unit is telling you to get yourself into gear and be proactive or you won't pass, and I liked that approach.

Opposing views were rare but it is worth noting that one student said that she considered another third-year unit, Multimedia News Production, more effective for developing the ability to work independently. This is a newsroom simulation unit in which students produce stories for the news website under strict daily deadlines. The student said she felt too reliant on her peers and tutors while completing Journalism Major Project.

### ***Journalism tradecraft***

At the start of the semester, the students were asked what specific journalism skills they hoped to develop through producing a major project. The most common answers were: interviewing skills, writing skills, producing multimedia journalism, storytelling skills, the ability to produce substantial journalism and investigative skills. When asked in the second survey what skill/s they had improved or developed through completing the project, almost all of the respondents nominated more than one disciplinary skill. For one student, the answer was 'every journalistic skill!'. The most common responses were interviewing, writing, editing, research, communication, photography and video. Interviewing was particularly prominent, with eleven of the sixteen students nominating that skill. Having extended time to complete the assignment was seen as a key factor in the development of interviewing skills:

The time we were afforded in this unit meant I was able to conduct far longer and more in-depth interviews than I had previously, and through each of them I was able to put into practice skills I hadn't yet mastered in my degree. The first of those was learning to listen.

Half of the students also reported improving their writing skills, with many saying they felt more comfortable with long-form writing. Some students went further, saying that producing the project and developing their disciplinary skills had provided a transitional experience, where they felt they had progressed from being a student to a journalist:

I really had what I would define as a career-starting experience, working out the process of being a journalist and calling on every skill I've learned at university to get me over the line.

The value of capstone units in providing this sense of transition for graduating students has been noted in related research. For example, after interviewing 76 US college students about their research capstone projects, Seymour et al. (2004: 531) concluded that the project experience generally prepared them for their future careers and was 'profoundly important for their emergent adult identity and sense of direction'.

## **Life skills**

While developing their journalism abilities, the students were simultaneously learning invaluable life skills. The naming and identification of these skills came from the students themselves in response to open questions about the unit. They were not given a list to choose from. It was somewhat surprising, and encouraging, to find that the most prevalent of these was 'confidence'. A high number of students described how their confidence had built over the course of completing the project:

This unit has also taught me to have more faith in my own abilities; something I have always struggled with, and I have definitely learnt to trust my own gut and intuition more.

I am now confident that I can be a proficient journalist, thanks to this unit.

Journalism Major Project has made me feel more confident and prepared for life after graduation than any other unit in my entire degree. Looking ahead to life after graduation, I am filled with both excitement and caution. But now, mostly due to this unit, I am now filled with a sense of pride and confidence that I too can go forth and change the world – one story at a time.

Many referred to the challenges and problems they faced while doing their project. Often these obstacles, such as not being able to interview an important source, or having to alter or abandon their original idea, compelled them to be adaptable. When they were able to adapt, and overcome such difficulties, they invariably felt a sense of achievement:

I learnt how strong I am as an individual and felt like I accomplished something I didn't think was going to happen.

Other research has also pointed to the ability of capstone units to engender self-sufficiency and confidence in students, who have regularly reported that they had exceeded their own expectations upon completion (Schermer and Gray 2012).

Perseverance, time management, organization, resilience and planning were among other skills the students described as developing over the course of the project unit. The expansion of these skills, combined with the sense of achievement associated with completing the project, affected their overall attitude about graduating and starting their careers. The students were asked about their perceived preparedness to enter the workforce at the start of the semester and again after completing the project. At the start of the semester, 46 per cent of the students surveyed did not feel prepared to enter the workforce. About one-quarter, or 27 per cent, felt ready and another 27 per cent were unsure. By the end of the semester, there had been a significant increase in the proportion of students who felt prepared to enter the workforce, with 50 per cent of the sixteen respondents saying they felt ready:

I do feel more prepared. It's hard to feel capable as a writer if you're relegated to short pieces of work. Uni has taught us how to walk, but the workforce wants us to run. This was our first go at running, so to speak.

Working independently and being responsible for our own work made us refine our skills in various areas and gave us a real sense of working in a non-university environment. All the aspects involved in the project such as developing and pitching ideas, creating and sticking to our own timelines, learning to adapt to changes, dealing with obstacles, and making decisions ourselves also helped in enhancing the feeling of preparation.

About 37 per cent were unsure about their job readiness after completing the project unit. Only 12 per cent still considered themselves unprepared to start their career.

## Conclusion

Returning to the research question that has guided the study, the student responses to the Journalism Major Project unit outlined above suggest that the unit meets the key objectives of a successful tertiary capstone experience. The literature contends that capstone units should be challenging and exciting (Lee and Loton 2015), and the results outlined here show that the students recognized the inherent challenges in the project unit, but also perceived the unit to offer something special and different to what they had previously studied. The responses also clearly demonstrated that most of the students felt they had integrated journalism skills and knowledge acquired over the course of their degree, and had enhanced those skills throughout the course of producing the project. They considered the production of the project to be an authentic journalism experience, with some saying they believed it had allowed them to make the transition from student to journalist.

Significantly, the survey responses indicated that most students believed the unit not only made them more employable, but also enhanced their *employability* by developing essential life skills. Chief among these was the ability to work independently. Most of the students thrived on the freedom the project unit offered and appreciated the opportunity to choose and focus on a topic they were passionate about. Working autonomously, and having to face and overcome the problems and obstacles that arose, allowed them to feel a strong sense of achievement upon completing the project. They also reported developing skills in communication, resilience, time management, organization and adaptability. The whole experience generally proved highly effective at building confidence in the students and increasing their sense of preparedness to start their careers.

The response to the unit surprised researchers and teaching staff who had not anticipated such a positive response to a new, untested, unit. The student feedback confirmed the value of the project approach, and justified the introduction of the unit to the journalism major at a time when the number of units was being reduced. While the majority of students believed the project was the preferable capstone model, they also expressed strong support for the internship and newsroom simulation units. They perceived each to contribute key skills and knowledge. Although this may not always be possible, students in this study clearly wanted all three units to be retained as part of the journalism major. This feedback has guided subsequent discussions about the structure of the Curtin journalism major and all three units continue to be offered to third-year students. Journalism Major Project is considered the culminating capstone unit.

Despite the encouraging response, the project unit could benefit from some refinements and additions. In terms of structural changes, feedback from students suggested a need to ensure they were on track earlier in semester. Many suggested that the presentation of the proposal should be around Week 4, instead of mid-semester. An absence of feedback about how the students intended to promote their projects after completion pointed to a need to expand the unit to include a stronger focus on entrepreneurship, promotion and branding. These should be considered core elements of the necessary disciplinary skills. Included in this are career preparation skills, such as resume writing, which also need to be better integrated into the unit.

The ultimate intention of this research project is to survey subsequent groups of students who complete the unit, to evaluate it over time and change. At this stage, it involves a small group of students from only one university, and the limitations of the study should be taken into account. Nevertheless, the relatively rare detailed student feedback provides a contribution to the literature regarding tertiary capstone units, and to the emerging body of research about capstone units in journalism education. In particular, it demonstrates strong student support for the project capstone model in journalism.

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