

Reflections on work experience: are some newsrooms failing the next generation of journalists?

Hilary Scott, Senior Lecturer in Journalism, University of Northampton

Abstract:

While undertaking short periods of work experience has been a time-honoured route into the journalism industry, placements have failed to keep pace with the requirements for mutually beneficial training. Yet work experience has the potential to solve many issues relevant to today's newsrooms, including recruitment of talent and the ability to refresh ideas and communicate news to a younger audience. This study examines student reflection on short work placements offered at UK media organisations by journalism undergraduates between 2009 and 2015, and also by journalists who have been employed in the media for many years. It covers national and regional newspapers, broadcasters, and press and public relations offices. Initial observations were disseminated at the Association of Journalism Education Annual Conference in June 2016. This article unpacks the findings of a follow-up survey which indicates the majority working in news media today believe their work experience cemented their ambition to become a journalist, while others still believe it is an unfair way to get your journalistic foot in the door.

Introduction

THERE is no doubt that becoming a 'workie' is an essential step on the ladder to a career in journalism and associated news media professions. "The perpetual drama of no job without experience and no experience without a job is one that everyone goes through when starting

a career. Getting your foot in the door somewhere is crucial...” says Alastair Reed (2013) for journalism.co.uk. Just about every journalist started this way, begging, nagging, or haranguing for two-week stints of unpaid labour.

Of the 111 survey responses, 35 per cent of respondents had completed work experience in the last 12 months, while more than 33 per cent had undertaken placements more than ten years ago (See appendix 1). This diversity in the career age of respondents may reinforce the embedded industry argument regarding the work experience method of ‘training’ - if you want to be a journalist badly enough, you will put up with it.

Purpose

This study of the contemporary reflections of those who have undertaken work experience came about after observing a growing number of undergraduate students who claimed to have been put off a career in journalism, or in a specific news media (newspapers, local radio) due to an unproductive placement. Issues to be taken into consideration included a small percentage for whom a career in the media had become a challenge, because of a variety of reasons, including lack of interest in the subject or lack of self-motivation. Nevertheless, Northampton’s academic staff, all previously employed as journalists, observed that talented and committed students were being lost to the industry before they had even started because of their placement.

The issue of ‘difficult’ work experience settings is nothing new. “...it is possible for even the most charming person to have a really nasty time on a work placement. They didn’t know you were coming, there is nowhere to sit, nobody will give you any work to do, and when you ask to go out with a senior reporter your request is greeted with a sigh” (McKane, 2004). Similarly, comments at the end of our survey reflected frustration with supervisors: “I found work experience to be a literal waste of my time. I spent hours sitting and desperately trying to find something to do. Any writing or suggestions/ ideas were ignored or declined. I was very aware that I was just another work experience student to them, and I was treated unfairly because of this. (R101, Work experience - an essential requirement for educating journalists? 2016)¹ Another commented: “I feel that for work experience to be effective it needs to be coupled with guidance from staff at the placement. Being left to my own devices I didn’t feel as if I learnt anything new.” (R5, 2016). Tutors at Northampton encourage critical self-reflection as part of the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984) for students, and it was notable that during feedback and reflection, both orally (presentations) and written (essays), students found it difficult to reconcile in the analysis, conclusion and action planning stages (Gibbs, 1998), that they could have done anything differently – and in many places it was difficult not to agree. They had done everything and more to get the most from their placement, but were left feeling they were failures, when in truth they had been failed by absent supervisors and over-worked or disinterested reporters.² As (McKane, 2004) adds: “This is why it is essential to get several different placements. If one is the placement from hell, the next will be better fun.”

Setting

The initial seed for the research was sown in 2013 during an informal feedback discussion with around 20 final year undergraduates who were discussing the pros and cons of their work experience placements. This came after formal submission of a summatively-assessed placement presentation, including a diary and cuttings portfolio. Many ‘good’ students who showed talent and commitment to journalism as a career during their three-year degree, which includes compulsory ‘real-time’ newsdays and a module on careers in the media, were actively avoiding a career in a newsroom as a direct consequence of their placement.

Work experience of at least a fortnight between years two and three had been a compulsory element of

1 The Work experience - an essential requirement for educating journalists? Survey allowed respondents to remain anonymous, while indicating which type of setting they were in, how long the placement was for, and how recently it was completed. Respondents are numbered.

2 One student had gone out and found a story, written it up with a photo and edited together a short video the day before starting at a local paper. The supervisor was impressed, and surprised, at the student’s dedication and ability. Yet the story, despite gentle reminders, was not used and the student was mostly ignored for the rest of the week, although they asked repeatedly if they could help, shadow or go out and try and bring in more stories. After this experience they took another placement at a local council press office and chose to pursue that career on graduation instead.

the degree at Northampton for more than ten years.³ Since 2014 this has been extended to a minimum of a week between years 1 and 2 and a further fortnight (as a minimum) between years 2 and 3 as part of the accreditation awarded by the Broadcast Journalism Training Council (BJTC). The BJTC unequivocally supports work experience as essential for journalism students:

Our industry partners consider structured, supervised work placements an essential element of an accredited course...Time and again student feedback suggests that a placement is one of the elements they most value on their course. Additionally, on the completion of a work placement students are better able to contextualise the skills they have acquired either on their course or while on placement. They understand the necessity to continue to apply and enhance these practical skills to achieve the standards they have observed during an immersive industry experience.” (BJTC, 2016)

As a BJTC accredited degree, Northampton can also put forward students for a small number of applications to larger broadcast employers such as the BBC and ITV in London and Salford, but pragmatically these are often difficult for Midlands-based students to take due to transport and accommodation costs and, generally, a less-affluent student profile. However, positive feedback from the handful who have been able to be accepted onto these placements, and been able to raise the funds to take them up, indicates that they tend to be more actively managed by supervisors keen to find and nurture those who excel. “We find the work placement system allows employers like the BBC, ITV, commercial radio and many others to keep an eye on the next generation of talent, and in turn allows that talent to demonstrate its skills and accomplishments to potential employers.” (BJTC, 2016)

The rise of the intern

There has been much debate about the increase in longer, often unpaid internships, frequently organised by large magazine groups but increasingly being used by newspapers and PR companies. While this study concentrates on short periods of work experience, the impact of intern culture in the UK cannot be ignored. Unpaid, or low-paid, internships have been widely criticised, not least by the NUJ’s campaign to stop the exploitation of student journalists. NUJ General Secretary Michelle Stanistreet said, “In recent years, work experience has grown from a short placement as part of a recognised course to months of unpaid or poorly-paid work which can continue long after a student has become fully qualified” (NUJ, 2013). “Employers are remarkably good at complaining about highly educated kids who don’t know anything about the real world,” Warwick University’s Professor Kate Purcell notes, ‘but less good at actually getting students in to do structured work experience that actually teaches them something’ (quoted in Kelly, 2010).

Methodology

Interrogation (with written consent) of reflective diaries, essays and presentations by former and current students who had been on work experience between 2009 and 2016 to determine which factors were affecting motivation. There were limitations in gaining a full record due to a move to digital preservation of student work on different servers, combined with some students taking hardcopy submissions back to use for job interviews.

Examination of data (feedback from supervisors)

Interviews with providers to see if universities need to do more to help manage WBL⁴ process

Interrogation of existing literature on work experience in various media sectors

Surveying those completing work experience in recent years. (See appendix 1)

A survey of 13 questions was created in June 2016 and sent out via email and social media, loosely aimed at current and former journalism students. Making the survey available via social media accounts⁵ effectively widened its reach to those who had done work experience more than 10 years ago, before significant changes in the industry. In retrospect this may have skewed the survey, as analysed below in the limitations section.

³ Mandatory for all BA (hons) single-honours journalism students – who after re-validation in 2013 became BA (hons) Multimedia Journalism students. Joint honours students are encouraged to find placements but are not assessed.

⁴ Work-based learning.

⁵ Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook and emails were used to distribute the survey link

Early results from student reflections were disseminated at the AJE Annual Conference in June during a short presentation. (See AJE website)

Survey findings:

The graphs in Appendix 1 show how the 111 survey respondents recall their work experience. Contrary to much of the early feedback from students' reflective writing, fewer than 10 per cent said they had not had an opportunity to contribute to and learn from their placement. This may be hindsight: "The most valuable aspect of work experience is that it helps to dispel misconceptions about journalism. I went to Vogue imagining all glamour and excitement and instead found it shallow and dull. I would never have had the career I did in newspapers if I hadn't done it - particularly as it was pre-journalism degrees." (R19, 2016)

While a quarter of the survey respondents are students, the majority are now in careers, 19 per cent in newspapers or online, 10 per cent in broadcast and 19 per cent in PR or press office jobs. Time and further experience may have made these graduates more positive about the impact of work experience on their overall career. It is also worth noting the majority of respondents, 82 per cent, did work experience as part of their university or college course, showing the shift in training from industry to universities (Frith & Meech, 2007).

The local route (with newspapers dominating) is still the most popular, allowing students to work close to their home or university. Almost 40 per cent worked with local papers, while 22 per cent were with regional broadcasters. National magazines took 9 per cent and online-only sites were low for placements (2 per cent), possibly because of the nature of solitary home working. Fewer than 2 per cent did work experience in PR or press offices, yet almost 20 per cent of respondents now work in this area. The marked growth of these public relations roles in recent years, and the reduction in the numbers of staff in newspaper and broadcast roles, may have created this new career path for ex-reporters. This said, the majority of respondents are still employed in newspapers and online.

Perhaps due to the impact of the NUJ's guidelines, 21.6 per cent received payment of expenses and 5 per cent received 'freebies' such as tickets. (NUJ, 2013)

Limitations

Had the survey been worded differently, better interrogation of the data might have resulted. The targeting of respondents should have been towards a specific timeframe for work experience to allow deeper understanding of recent changes in newsrooms. Feedback from employers and supervisors is needed to extract that angle of evidence, and would offer a more objective overview.

Conclusion

While there is anecdotal evidence that a poor work placement experience can put 'good' trainees off, the survey shows that almost half the respondents are still employed in journalism or PR settings. The others were split almost equally between those who are still students and those employed in other fields. The majority (60.4%) believed work experience is still essential to a career in journalism and that you would not get a job without it. A further 28.8% agreed, but said graduates could be employed without work experience. Just 3.6 per cent believed it was an out-dated concept which penalised the less well-off.

Further development of this research is required to better understand the changes in newsroom practices and formulate a more organised and mutually-beneficial system of on-the-job training for all students of journalism.

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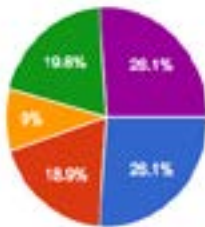
Appendix 1: Survey findings. Work experience - an essential requirement for educating journalists? (Survey, 2016)

When did you undertake work experience?



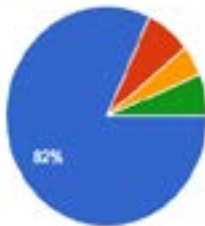
In the last 12 months	39	35.1%
1-2 years ago	11	9.9%
2-3 years ago	17	15.3%
5-10 years ago	7	6.3%
More than 10 years ago	37	33.3%

What is your current role within the media? (please state role if 'other')



Journalism/media student	29	26.1%
Journalist (newspapers/online)	21	18.9%
Journalist (broadcast)	10	9%
PR/press relations	22	19.8%
Other	29	26.1%

When did you undertake work experience?



While at training/university	91	82%
After training/university	8	7.2%
Straight from school	5	4.5%
Other	7	6.3%

How long did your work experience last in total?



1-2 weeks	42	37.8%
2-4 weeks	23	20.7%
1-2 months	20	18%
2-6 months	12	10.8%
6 months +	10	9%
Other	4	3.6%

Where was your placement? (please state setting if 'other')



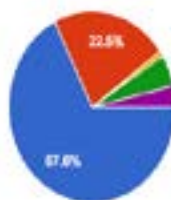
At a local newspaper	44	39.6%
At a national newspaper	3	2.7%
At a local magazine	1	0.9%
At a national magazine	10	9%
At an online-only publication	3	2.7%
At a local broadcaster	24	21.8%
At a national broadcaster	7	6.3%
In a PR/marketing setting	2	1.8%
In a press-office setting	1	0.9%
Other	16	14.4%

Did you organise your own work experience or was it arranged for you?



I organised it myself	80	81.1%
It was organised for me via my school/university/training course	13	11.7%
It was organised by my family/friends	1	0.9%
Other	7	6.3%

Did you feel you had a clear opportunity to contribute and learn in the field you wished to pursue (eg, journalism/PR)?



Yes, I was given supervised instruction and opportunity to contribute	75	67.6%
Yes, but I was left to my own devices	25	22.5%
No, I felt I was not trusted to perform basic media-related tasks	1	0.9%
No, I felt I was used only to fulfil administrative work such as filing, tidying and making tea	6	5.4%
Other	4	3.6%

Did you have the opportunity to get a by-line or professional credit for your work?



Yes, in print	30	27%
Yes, online	11	9.9%
Yes, in print and online	25	22.5%
Yes, in broadcast	18	16.2%
No	13	11.7%
No, They gave the credit to another member of staff	2	1.8%
Credit not possible due to the nature of my placement	8	7.2%
Other	4	3.6%

Did you receive payment of expenses?



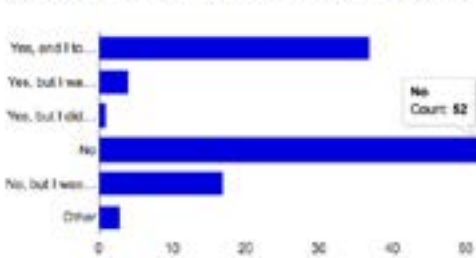
Yes	24	21.6%
No	77	69.4%
Payment in kind: eg, tickets, freebies	6	5.4%
Other	4	3.6%

How far did you have to travel to the work experience placement?



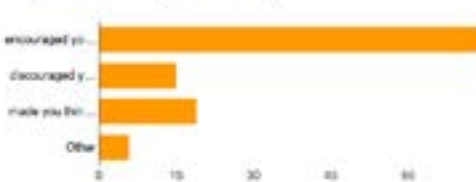
Less than 1 mile	7	6.3%
1-3 miles	24	21.6%
I had to use public transport which cost more than £5 a day	33	29.7%
I needed to be able to drive in order to get there	20	18%
I had to stay over to complete the placement (at a hotel or similar)	7	6.3%
I had to stay over to complete the placement (with friends)	8	7.2%
Other	12	10.8%

Were you offered paid-work as a result of your work experience?



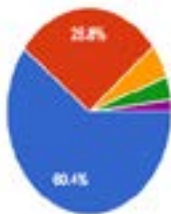
Yes, and I took it	37	33.3%
Yes, but I was not able to accept it	4	3.6%
Yes, but I did not want it	1	0.9%
No	52	46.8%
No, but I was offered the chance to continue unpaid	17	15.3%
Other	3	2.7%

Did your feel that your work experience...



encouraged you to pursue a career in that field of work?	74	66.7%
discouraged you from a career in that field of work?	15	13.5%
made you think about a career in another area of journalism?	19	17.1%
Other	6	5.4%

Overall, do you feel work experience is still essential for anyone intending to pursue a career in journalism?



Yes, you will not be considered for a job without it	57	60.4%
Yes, but it is possible to get a job without it	32	28.8%
No, it should not be a prerequisite to getting a job	6	5.4%
No, it is an out-dated concept which penalises the less well-off	4	3.6%
Other	2	1.8%

The survey also produced 41 voluntary comments as detailed below:

It's still the case that unless you have parents who can look after your living expenses it's almost impossible to get a foothold in the media. Laws on interns/work exp have improved the situation for work experience and clarified the area for employers. Many employers would like to take work experience on but there is no centralised online system to make that easy.

I do think exposure to the real-life world of newsrooms is important for would-be journalists. Many have unrealistic expectations of the job and so spending some time in a newsroom can open their eyes to the realities. While my experience convinced me it was the job I wanted, I've come across plenty of examples of people who've decided to pursue other careers after spending some time with working journalists. Having said that, I feel strongly that journalism should be a career open to everyone and requiring would-be candidates to undertake unpaid work experience could definitely close the door to those for whom that would not be manageable.

I think work experience is extremely valuable. The newsroom was not like I expected, it was much better! But that might not be the reaction for everyone. I was lucky that in that era one week on a local paper was all the work experience I needed to land an in-demand trainee role with Trinity Mirror which included the fast track Newcastle course. It is a shame that people in that position today would be likely to have to work unpaid for weeks or months, with much less guarantee that it would lead to a job.

In an increasingly competitive job market it is absolutely essential that trainee or wannabe journalists

undertake work experience, and to be prepared to work for very little initially to get their foot in through the door. Without maximising opportunities they won't get very far!

Work experience is essential for the individual as it allows you to realise whether that profession is something you want to pursue with further.

Too many work experience students appear brain washed / innovation and spirit is required.

Make sure you come with ideas and knowledge of the outlet you're working for. Read listen or watch in advance

I think work experience is absolutely essential for journalists, experience is so important in the industry and gives students the chance to see what roles are and are not for them. It was definitely beneficial for me.

Work experience was invaluable in determining what I wanted to do as a career and it also provided me with material for a showreel. It also allowed me to meet people who were instrumental in me getting jobs and further experience in broadcasting.

Regarding the above question - it's crucial you get it, because it makes you understand a work environment. But you should get expenses and it shouldn't be longer than two weeks at a time so it doesn't penalise poorer people

The most valuable aspect of work experience is that it helps to dispel misconceptions about journalism. I went to Vogue imagining all glamour and excitement and instead found it shallow and dull. I would never have had the career I did in newspapers if I hadn't done it - particularly as it was pre-journalism degrees.

Although I didn't go into the area I did my work experience, it still taught me skills that I can apply to my current role (Communications Officer). I found it really helpful and learnt a lot and it helped me decide where which sector I wanted to go into once I had graduated.

I did three lots of work experience at three different local papers and one at *The Times*. With each of them I was left to my own devices but had some basic instruction as to what was expected. When I found myself forgotten, I went up and asked for more work. I also sorted the experience out for myself and, although one of the sessions was at my local paper I also paid for myself to go to London and Nottingham, where I stayed with family and friends. The standard of local journalism has been affected by reductions in staff and the pressure to put apparently unedited work online but the industry itself is still extremely competitive so I don't know how anyone would get a job without work experience on their cv and it is invaluable for the students themselves. I've seen students fail to land work experience as they've submitted badly spelled emails to editors and I've seen students walk out on placements because they haven't had enough to do, but that's part of the test- getting yourself in, making a decent effort, showing initiative and imagination. The busier the workplace the less likely people will be able to spoonfeed, but that's what working as a journalist is like in reality.

Is a good sign to recruiters that someone is passionate enough and organised enough to sort out work experience - plus resourceful enough to carry it out regardless of hurdles. Actually **doing** the job is so different to what you're taught that I'd be very wary of someone without real-world experience.

I feel it definitely determined that, at age 14, this defined what career path I wanted to take. And, having hosted many many work experience students over the years I do feel it is the best training and insight for them, albeit a minor grudge for the editors and staff, especially in the summer months when you spend so much time trying to make their experience worthwhile when you are already trying to balance a hectic workload.

I truly feel that you have to be in this field to get opportunities in this field. I've written for papers since High School. I find it challenging in Indianapolis in general. As Freelancer, you have a little more flexibility. You must make consistency unless you make it! I truly enjoy research, writing, learning, people and various perspectives. At times it appears as if the people aspect of writing is now shifted to technology and not content and facts.

I think companies need to make more out of their work experience candidates. It seems as though you're a nuisance- and you have to fight to stand out!

Learn and watch and take the initiative, news editors can only say no.

I enjoyed my first week of journalism, I was taken out with different journalists to help contribute to stories, was helping the photojournalist to set up picture opportunities and was encouraged to find my own story to get a by-line for. After work experience I wrote a lot for online blogs, which I enjoyed as I was a lot more free to write what I wanted, how I wanted to write and the feedback from the online community

was very positive and encouraging.

Really try and do as many placements as possible whilst you're at university with a lot of spare time and a free overdraft! It's much harder to work for free after university when all of your friends are in paid jobs. Also, don't aim too low for your placements. Only apply to your dream places because if you're working for free then you need to enjoy it!

Most jobs require you to have experience so I feel it is necessary to have it.

Especially now there is much for the employer / mentor to learn from younger people who is on experience re tech, language, communications prefs, and excellent questions which have not been tainted by years of experience.

It's a joke that even some of the biggest places don't pay a single penny towards expenses when completing a placement (cough, BBC, cough). Yes I think you should have to work hard to get a placement and work hard while you're on it, but that hard work should be rewarded somehow.

Experience is just as valuable as a degree to some extent!! Worth pursuing, even if only for a couple of weeks. It was beneficial for me.

There are certain aspects of editorial operations that a would-be journalist should absorb before he or she enters the profession full time. Especially given the little amount of time editorial managers and administrators have to offer on-the-job training, this is essential in any internship or other experience one can gain.

The fast-paced growth of technology demands work experience to stay abreast of changes and tools used in the field.

My work experience was unpaid and I had to stay at a hostel in London - I was living in Liverpool at the time, so had to pay for accommodation, travel and living expenses while I was there. If you're from a poorer background, like I am, look around and see what help is available. I was able to get a hardship grant from my university to cover the costs of my travel. I applied for the work experience early (five months in advance), so was given the time to save money to cover my accommodation costs and have a bit aside for food (plus a suitcase full of pot noodles!). Although it was expensive I absolutely do not regret taking part and would recommend it to anyone. I felt that I learnt a lot in a short space of time, was given a professional reference at the end, a bylined piece for my portfolio and a clearer image in my mind of where I wanted to end up.

From my own personal experiences, the smaller the company the more you will learn and get involved in.

Honestly, no other industry hires students to work for free. Most business students have co-op and are PAID. Why do news rooms and magazines think it's okay to not pay a student? It's harder for those starting out to get a job, when newsrooms/magazines know they can just get an intern for free to do the work instead.

Some of the most specialized journalism roles (reporting) still really require work experience. Producers and other more technical skills could succeed without one, though it still would be preferable

Tip for anyone going for journalism work experience: show you can speak to people! Don't sit there quietly, show you can interview people face-to-face and over the phone, don't hide behind computer screens and email people, get out there and speak to them personally. Be full of ideas and make yourself seen and heard. Make an impression.

I found work experience to be a literal waste of my time. I spent hours sitting and desperately trying to find something to do. Any writing or suggestions/ ideas were ignored or declined. I was very aware that I was just another work experience student to them, and I was treated unfairly because of this.

I loved doing work experience because on all my placements I was capable enough to be able write stories, etc (I even got a splash). It confirmed journalism was for me. Having worked as a journalist and now in PR, I think work experience placements work best if the candidate has enough experience to be able to get on with journalism-type tasks. I hated seeing workies twiddling with thumbs and would try to take them on jobs where I could, but in busy newsrooms or with desk-bound reporters this isn't always possible. It's great when the work experience person is enthusiastic, clued-up and capable. I think it's really essential, but I never did more than a two-week placement and I think anyone who says their placements must be for months unpaid is taking the piss.

I wish there were more opportunities available for those wishing to pursue journalism, that have little or no experience. I have wanted to have a career in journalism for years but felt in a catch 22 position in terms of experience. Eventually I decided to apply for a post graduate course in Journalism, and got access

to some experience that way.

Essential! My first journalism experience gave me a great insight into PR, which is what I decided to pursue in the end. I wouldn't have known that my passion was PR without seeking and undertaking work experience in journalism.

I find that the most successful journalists usually have at least two internships under their belt before they get hired full time - in my case, I had three internships, plus one unusual work assignment (my first work experience was as an undercover reporter) - I find that there are things that even if you study journalism in college and work for the college paper, there are things that aren't or can't be taught in a classroom, but must be learned on the job

Great way of understanding how the real life of a journalist works after we all finish uni

While it feels like a daunting process at times, I feel as though Work Experience is absolutely necessary for my chosen career path. It gave me the opportunity to not only practice and hone my skills, but help others in the process. It's a great system that helps you prepare for the wider world and post-graduation climate.

I feel that for work experience to be effective it needs to be coupled with guidance from staff at the placement. Being left to my own devices I didn't feel as if I learnt anything new.

"It's not what you know, it's who you know" after speaking with various people on my work experience I understood that this phrase is particularly relevant within journalism when it comes to pursuing a career within this field of work. I believe that if the work experience are willing to allow people to do journalism and media during their experience then it's a good idea to get some practice but if it's just to do work that otherwise would be delayed like emails then it's not for someone doing work experience to do this.

Before my work experience I ruled out a career in Journalism as learning about Journalism is completely different to actually working within the industry. Because of work experience I now have a clear idea about what I want to do in the future.