

4. Media and journalism training in Vanuatu

Commentary: In 2009, a two-year diploma course in Journalism and Media began at the Vanuatu Institute of Technology. It was the first full-time journalism and media course in the country and was long overdue as the local media industry expanded. It is the only diploma level course offered at the VIT. The Pacific Media and Communications Facility was established at VIT seven years ago as part of an AusAID initiative, managed by MDI International in association with MC Media and Associates. Work in the facility served as the basis of the two-year diploma course. It provided a foundation for more than 30 graduates, many of whom are now employed in the burgeoning media industry in Vanuatu. This commentary traces the background and development of this programme.

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IN 2009, a two-year diploma course in Journalism and Media began at the Vanuatu Institute of Technology (VIT). It was the first full-time journalism and media course in the country and was long overdue as the local media industry expanded. It is the only diploma level course offered at the VIT. The Pacific Media and Communications Facility was established at VIT seven years ago as part of an AusAID initiative, managed by MDI International in association with MC Media and Associates. Work in the facility served as the basis of the two year diploma course. It has been a foundation for more than 30 graduates, many of whom are now employed in the burgeoning media industry in Vanuatu.

The original co-ordinator of the diploma was Arthur Edgell-Brookers. Although a highly educated man, he had no knowledge of journalism and the media, and was somewhat bemused that he had been chosen for the position.

In 2010, Tony and Elaine Wilson joined the school after moving to Vanuatu from Australia. Tony Wilson is currently in his 43rd year as a journalist and has a proven track record in most facets of the craft. He has worked as a journalist in both print and radio in three continents at the highest levels. He has won awards for his work and is also a published best-selling author. Elaine Wilson has worked as a journalist for 33 years, working in two continents, both in print

and radio journalism. She has extensive experience in layout and design, and sub-editing. She also has a Bachelor of Education specialising in English and Media Studies—most likely the only one of its kind in Vanuatu.

The diploma design showed initial flaws and displayed limited knowledge of ni-Vanuatu and Melanesian mores and way of life. Some courses have been so off the mark that it appears the authors had little knowledge of the Pacific in general and Vanuatu in particular. For example, there is a module devoted to Business and Economic Reporting, in a country which is unlikely to ever see a stock market and where there is no dedicated business media. A few classes about economic journalism and the principles of business writing are more than adequate for Vanuatu and even these are confusing to the students and with very simple terms and detail needing explanation.

By 2015, sections of this course had become outdated and in need of a fresh outlook. Trainers Tony and Elaine Wilson and I have reviewed, refined and tweaked the course over the past six years as we continue to learn from students, graduates and would-be employers.

For the Certificate class we found most of the existing modules were useful. We have found that Writing for Print is pretty much covered in the Basic News Writing module which is the most critical in the course. The other Certificate modules are adequate except for Investigative Journalism. This is not suitable for first year students and the reality is that no media outlet in Port Vila is big enough to have the luxury of being able to have a journalist work on a potential story for weeks. So when we cover this topic, we do not spend too much time on it.

For the Diploma class, we have dispensed with the Mentoring module, which has no relevance in producing employable journalists at all. We have put more emphasis on writing for the internet as this is clearly the future of journalism worldwide. We would like the opportunity to formalise this into a proper module. Students began asking for classes on public relations four years ago and we believe this is an area that will grow significantly in Port Vila in the coming years with greater opportunities for employment. We would also like to create a full PR module.

The principles of good journalism and media clearly do not change, but the delivery and adaptation vary enormously and the right delivery to ni-Vanuatu students takes considerable thought and planning. Like journalism courses around the world, female students outnumber the males by around three to one. In Vanuatu, females are truly second class citizens and as such are not encouraged to speak out or have any significant public opinions.

In the 52-member Parliament, there are no female MPs and that has been the norm for some time. The prospects of females gaining a seat in the Vanuatu parliament are limited at best. Journalists and other media people are outgoing, confident people by their very nature and this is hard to establish in Vanuatu

where females are subdued and loathe to express an opinion publicly. As we teach them how to write a news story we also have to find ways to instill confidence in them so they are even prepared to ask a question.

This is almost impossible to put into a structured form that will work for the majority of female students each year. So, after some time with each group of new students we will work out strategies—more often than not for each individual—to try to encourage the females to speak up and ask questions.

In 2016, for example, we had a total of 13 students, only three of whom were male. Ratios like this become critical as we prepare our classes to achieve maximum successful results. We have to become part time psychologists to build the individuals' confidence while teaching the basic rudiments of the media—and that means media in Vanuatu, not Australia or New Zealand. It is a real challenge, but not insurmountable, once you understand the ni-Vanuatu and how the local media works. We are certain we are on the right path, but the evolution of the original course remains a work in progress as each year passes.

A considerable section of the second semester is devoted to work experience at various organisations in Port Vila and in Luganville on Santo. A number of students have gained full-time employment from these placements.

We conclude the year with CV preparations and how to write a covering letter for a job application as well as mock job interviews. Experience has shown that this preparation has helped a number of students gain employment. We know that not all students will obtain media jobs, but those that do not will be better equipped in the general job market.

None of the organisations that have employed graduates from VIT have complained to us about the standard of the graduates after entering the workforce.

Most of our students have good records from their schools in years 12 and 13, yet many have deficiencies in their written and spoken English, which have to be rectified where possible, as the majority of the media in Vanuatu is conducted in English. This means special English classes are conducted at the beginning of the year for the Certificate III students in an effort to raise their standard to that required to become a competent journalist. We have been forced to place more emphasis on grammar and English to bring students to a required standard.

We established some years ago that many of the students were not computer literate as they came from schools that were under-equipped. We have added to the course some basic training in skills like surfing the net and creating Word documents. We know not all our graduates will gain employment in the media and we hope these added skills will give the students opportunities to obtain jobs at a better level than would have been the case before they did the course.

We have a success rate of around 60 percent in helping graduates find positions in the media industry, a figure of which we are extremely proud.

To the actual classroom work we have added guest speakers such as the

country's first President George Sokomanu, Sethy Regenvanu, senior police officers and environmentalists. We also make field trips to the Magistrates, Court, police headquarters, Parliament, the National Archives, the Meteo and others. All these additions have to be written about in the form of either news or feature stories, adding to the skill set of the students, as well as keeping their classes interesting and motivating.

We ask senior journalists like Evelyne Toa and Moses Stephens to speak to them about various specialist aspects of journalism. Because of Tony Wilson's position as editor of *The Independent* weekly newspaper, the students have full access to a working newspaper and are encouraged to submit articles and photos, many of which have been published over the years. This is believed to be a unique situation for journalism students in the Pacific region. We have also managed to secure two annual scholarships for students whose families are struggling to pay fees.

All this has been managed with an acute lack of resources. The Journalism and Media School boasts six computers, not all of which work all the time, and with limited access to the internet. There are two film cameras; one still shot Canon camera and a few small still cameras. We have no equipment for doing any TV or radio work. There are a few secondhand text books the Wilsons managed to obtain from Bond University journalism school in Queensland.

We have two whiteboards, a motley array of desks and chairs, a photocopier (which occasionally works), and classrooms that leak when it rains. However, the students soldier on with us despite these sub-standard conditions.

There are grey clouds hovering over the future of this school, with efforts by some authorities to turn the diploma into a three-year course. The Wilsons have other duties outside of VIT, as they have to make a living and simply could not teach three year-levels in a week. Despite our best efforts we have been unable to find any other qualified trainers or experienced journalists prepared to take on the role of trainers.

Added to this, the media and journalism course is the most expensive course offered at VIT and many parents struggle to find the funds for two years. We believe few would have the resources to cover those costs for a third year.

Dave Mandavah is co-ordinator of the two-year diploma course in Journalism and Media at the Vanuatu Institute of Technology (VIT). He has more than 15 years' experience in print media, graphics design and radio production, filming, video editing and media sales in radio. An earlier version of this article was presented at the Australian and Pacific Preconference at the Fourth World Journalism Education Congress (WJEC) at Auckland University of Technology, Aotearoa/New Zealand, on 13 July 2017 with sponsorship from the NZ Institute for Pacific Research.