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Afghanistan? Somewhere west of India, isn't it?

Roger Patching and Martin Hirst

Abstract

For more than 10 years the senior co-author has been regularly testing tertiary journalism students on their "News Geography" – the ability to accurately locate on a world map 10 countries that had been in the news at the time, or with which Australia has or has had a bond. His co-author joined him in 1997 to compare results from two universities, Charles Sturt and Western Sydney. They joined forces again in 2002 to compare the geographic knowledge of first-year journalism students at Queensland University of Technology with that of senior students at the University of Queensland. The most surprising result was that despite "The War on Terror", and Australia's involvement, relatively few could accurately locate Afghanistan. For several years the senior co-author has also tested first-year journalism students' knowledge of a series of figures and statistics that give a barometer of the Australian and world economies. The latest monetary exchange rates, gold and oil prices and national and state unemployment rates are used to test students' knowledge of the various statistics journalists regularly rely on as indicators of economic movements. The authors also combined in 2002 to test students at QUT and UQ on this knowledge.

Introduction

Research (Alysen & Oakham, 1996) suggests students are drawn to tertiary journalism programs partly because they see journalism as an exciting and glamorous profession. Anecdotal evidence gathered from nearly 30 years' experience teaching in tertiary journalism programs suggested to the authors that the most glamorous part of journalism, according to their students, was working as a foreign correspondent, bringing an Australian perspective to reporting from international "hot spots". It would seem to follow that students would take an interest in where the big international news was coming from. At the same time, "proximity" is one of the most important news values: it holds

that events occurring closer to "home" will receive more coverage than those that are distant. While this is generally true in a geographical sense for "local" news, other factors come into play when reviewing the international or global news agenda. The "distance-decay" model is complicated by issues such as the perceived newsworthiness of a place or event, rather than its distance from the news market. The concept of "cultural proximity" is also an important factor in the reporting of global news: Does the target audience have some resonating cultural connection with the event, the location, or the ideological "framing" of the news item? For example, in Australia the reporting of "The War on Terror" from September 2001 onwards has been very much framed by perceived cultural, political and ideological ties between Australia and the United States. This has taken the form of a parallel "national interest" between the two nations.

Further, the authors believe that if journalists are to interpret the local and global significance of news "events" for their audiences, they need to know something of the world they're reporting on. Historically, reporting from war zones and other "hot spots" also involved a certain level of cultural interpretation for the "home" readers, listeners and viewers. For example, Torney-Parlicki (2000) argues that Australian coverage of conflicts in Asia, from WWII onwards, has involved a large quantity of geographic, historical and anthropological information for the benefit of audiences unfamiliar with the region. She suggests this has been an important factor in Australia's "coming to terms with" our northern neighbours. The Keating years set a benchmark for this response of greater engagement. Of course, the remarkable events in Indonesia and greater interest in the region have led to an increase in reporting and a greater diversity of opinion.

Such "background" information is indeed important, particularly in the reportage of complex political issues, such as those surrounding the ongoing conflict in the Middle East. It is a cliché, but still very apt in this context: one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter. However, if basic facts are omitted from the daily coverage, such contradictions are lost in an ideological fog and an unwitting bias can creep into the reportage. British researcher Greg Philo calls it a failure to inform on the part of the media, particularly television. He highlights the superficiality of much television news coverage, with its focus on conflict and tragedy rather than the controversial aspects of the close relationship between the United States and Israel – in particular, the media's failure to engage with the background or political implications of the story (Philo, 2002).

There is very little Australian work that tries to relate the extent of geographical "knowledge" held by reporters to their interpretation of the news agenda. Indeed, most research in this area has tended to look at the reverse equation – the role of the media in making "spatial information" and geography more accessible to a mass audience. Significantly, this research has been

done by geographers, rather than journalism academics. Walmsley uses techniques of simple content analysis – “place name counting” to derive an “indication of the intensity as well as the geographical spread of news reporting” (1980, p. 344). However, this is not correlated against any studies of journalists’ sense of geography. Aspaas (1998) has also developed strategies for improving geography students’ awareness of global events and places in the world by incorporating media coverage into tertiary geography courses. This study addresses the issues from the perspective of journalism education and suggests some strategies for improving students’ knowledge of geography in a way that might directly improve their news sense and judgment.

Background

The researchers believe that the geography and numbers tests reported here are indicators of general knowledge, a key ingredient of successful journalism. The answers, in each case, could be easily found by a careful consumption of daily media. However, it has been established over a number of years that journalism students do not necessarily pay much attention to newspapers, radio or television.

The senior co-author began testing tertiary journalism students’ knowledge of what he called “News Geography” in the early 1990s, after Ian Richards had reported to the JEA conference in Adelaide in 1989 that “most students out of year 12 are abysmally ignorant of the world in general” (Richards cited in Patching, 1994, p. 123). When they were first tested in 1993, the average for a class of advanced journalism students at Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, was a score of 3.1. Five registered zero. No-one managed 10, 9 or even 8. The group had no idea where countries were located in Africa; they also had trouble “finding” Mexico and the North Atlantic Ocean. Closer to home, the results were better. The two countries/areas most correctly located were Japan and Indonesia. Next best were Vietnam and the Indian Ocean.

Five years later nothing much had changed. In 1998, no-one tested at CSU managed 10 or 9, and only two out of 35 students could manage a score of 8. This time three managed zero. The most correctly located country was Northern Ireland, with 63 per cent, followed by a big drop to 29 per cent for Vietnam, 28 per cent for Cuba, and 26 per cent for both Afghanistan and Bosnia. At the bottom of the CSU scale, only 6 per cent could locate Timor or Somalia, and no-one knew where Rwanda was.

The University of Western Sydney (Nepean) cohort of 47 fared better in overall marks, and slightly better in locating individual countries. One managed 10 out of 10, two students got 9 and three got 8 or 8½ (students are given a half mark if they locate the country “very close” to its actual location). Again, Northern Ireland topped the list of the most correctly located, with 60 per cent, followed by Vietnam with 56 per cent. Surprisingly, compared with the CSU

results, 42 per cent “found” Rwanda. Afghanistan was correctly located by 22 per cent, Timor by 20 per cent, Cuba by 16 per cent and the least correctly located country was Somalia, with 7 per cent (Patching & Hirst, 1998).

The 2002 test

The 1998 results are particularly relevant because six of the countries (Northern Ireland, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Timor, Cuba and Somalia) were among those selected for the 2002 test. In 2002, the other four countries were Iraq (part of US President Bush’s “Axis of Evil”, later to be invaded by the so-called Coalition of the Willing), Israel (always at the centre of Middle East conflict), Zimbabwe (because of the ongoing murder of white land-owners, the discussion of the future of the country in the Commonwealth at CHOGM in Queensland in early March 2002, and the national election that followed), and South Korea (located “beneath” one of the other members of Bush’s Axis of Evil and a major Asian trading partner with Australia).

Two of the six countries common to the 1998 and most recent tests (Northern Ireland and Vietnam) were chosen specifically for historical comparison. Vietnam figures in all three sets of tests (1994, 1998, 2002). The troubles in Northern Ireland had been ongoing, and it was considered interesting to establish whether the “new generation” of tertiary journalism students knew where Vietnam was, considering some of their parents or relatives may have taken part in that doomed conflict. Some media had suggested that Afghanistan would prove to be the United States’ second Vietnam. Timor was in the test because Australian forces were involved in a peacekeeping role as their near northern neighbour gained independence from Indonesia. Cuba was included (again) because much had been made of the so-called “Camp X” at the American naval base at Guantanamo Bay in that country, to which alleged Al-Qaeda and Taliban terrorists were taken to await trial. The group included Australian David Hicks, who had allegedly sided with the Taliban. Finally, Somalia was included not only because Australians had served there in the ’90s, but also because the much-published film, *Black Hawk Down*, including in the cast Australian actor Eric Bana, was screening in theatres around Brisbane.

In the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States, President Bush declared “The War on Terror” and orchestrated a coalition of nations to attack terrorist Osama Bin Laden’s Al-Qaeda forces and their hosts, the Taliban government ruling Afghanistan. It was assumed because of the avalanche of coverage of the war that most journalism students – even those just beginning their tertiary studies in early 2002 – would be interested in at least the coverage of the conflict, if not the war itself and the international politics surrounding it. It was also assumed that most students would also know where Cuba was, given that an Australian was imprisoned there awaiting trial, possi-

bly for his life. Timor was still of news interest with the approaching presidential election and, given its relative geographic proximity to Darwin, it was assumed most students would have some idea where it was located. It was also considered likely that many students, given the continuing coverage of them, would have a fair idea where Northern Ireland, Iraq and Israel were "on the map".

The results in 2002: QUT

The Queensland University of Technology cohort for the test was taken from 205 students enrolled in 2002 in the first semester core journalism subject Journalism Information Systems. They were tested in the second week of March, a week after the end of CHOGM (which had been postponed from its original time of early October 2001 because of security concerns in the wake of the September 11 attacks) and just after the close of voting in the Zimbabwe elections. Australian Special Forces were about to take part in the fierce Operation Anaconda in Afghanistan and *Black Hawk Down* was playing to big houses.

It should be noted that the world map used for the test was "adapted" from one that appeared in *Time* magazine. The magazine used to publish the map each week, highlighting international trouble spots. The map used highlighted capitals such as Beijing (though that didn't stop many students thinking South Korea was located somewhere inland from it), New Delhi (which many seemed to think was a city in Afghanistan), Moscow, The Hague and, unfortunately in this context, Havana. The African continent for some reason was in lighter tones, and unlike the other "darker" (in tone) continents, it was possible to make out the borders of the various nation-states. That given, you still had to know where Zimbabwe was, and that Havana was the capital of Cuba. The author also misspelled the word Geography in the title, transposing the letters "g" and "r", a mistake that only one of the 189 QUT students who took the test was courageous enough to point out. In passing, none of the 47 students who did the geography test at the University of Queensland even mentioned the spelling mistake.

Nothing much has changed at the bottom end of the scale (see Table 1). Seven couldn't locate any of the countries. Most attempted only a few and gave up, one didn't attempt any, saying she was at university precisely "to learn these sorts of things", but one incorrectly located all 10! Three knew roughly where one country was. They "nearly" located Zimbabwe, Timor and Vietnam between them. Another 15 got either 1 or 1½; almost half of them (seven) located Cuba correctly, and seven knew roughly where Afghanistan is to be found on a map. Two knew where to find Zimbabwe, and four more "roughly" where it is.

At the other end of the scale, three first-year QUT students managed the Afghanistan? Somewhere west of India?, *AJR* 25(2), pp. 169-188

perfect 10. Of the four who managed 9½, three had a rough idea where Afghanistan is, and the other had trouble correctly locating Iraq. Of the eight students with 9, all but two lost their mark by only “roughly” locating two countries. Four got half a mark for their attempt to locate Afghanistan, and two others for nearly correctly locating Zimbabwe. Of the two that missed correctly locating one country, one missed with Somalia, and the other South Korea. The trend continued among those with 8½ – all lost half a mark for their attempt at locating Afghanistan and, surprisingly, four had trouble “finding” Timor.

A total of 83 of the QUT group – almost 44 per cent – managed less than 5. Almost three-quarters scored less than 7. The bottom 25 scored 20.5 points between them. The top 15 (those with 9.5 or 10) scored 140 points – almost seven times the bottom 25’s total score.

Table 1: “News Geography” test – QUT scores

Figure in brackets indicates how many received the added “half” a mark.

Score	No.	Per cent	Progressive total	Progressive percentage
0	7	3.7	7	3.7
0.5	3	1.6	10	5.3
1 & 1.5 (8)	15	8	25	13.2
2 & 2.5 (12)	19	10	44	23.2
3 & 3.5 (8)	22	11.6	66	34.8
4 & 4.5 (6)	17	9	83	43.8
5 & 5.5 (14)	34	18	117	61.8
6 & 6.5 (9)	23	12.1	140	74
7 & 7.5 (3)	13	6.8	153	80.9
8 & 8.5 (5)	21	11.1	174	92
9 & 9.5 (4)	12	6.3	186	98.3
10	3	1.6	189	100

The most recognised countries

The country correctly located most often was Cuba. Nearly 70 per cent of QUT students and 60 per cent of UQ students were able to “find” it. Possibly this was because the capital, Havana, was indicated on the map in small type.

Table 2 gives a breakdown of how the various countries fared in the “location stakes”. The heading “ball park” denotes those who had a good idea where the particular country is to be found and were given half a mark for being “close”. For the purposes of comparison, the figures of those who were “close” are noted, but not considered.

Table 2: Country recognition table (QUT)

Country	Located		Ball park		Total	
	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent
Cuba	129	68	6	3	135	71
N. Ireland	119	63	6	3	125	66
Zimbabwe	110	58	32	17	142	75
Israel	90	47	16	8	106	56
Somalia	82	43	13	7	95	50
Iraq	69	36	23	12	92	48
South Korea	69	36	2	1	71	37
Timor	66	35	16	8	82	43
Vietnam	50	26	17	9	67	35
Afghanistan	41	21	69	36	110	58

Nearly two-thirds correctly located Northern Ireland and, again possibly with the help of the map, nearly 60 per cent "found" Zimbabwe.

Less than half of the QUT group (47 per cent) were "on the money" when it came to Israel, and a few less (43 per cent) correctly located Somalia.

One of the countries that figured at the time in President Bush's "Axis of Evil" (and came in for much closer attention from the US and a handful of its allies later in 2002, leading to the invasion in early 2003), Iraq, shared 36 per cent recognition with the neighbour of another "Axis of Evil" country, South Korea. Surprisingly, little more than a third of the QUT group (35 per cent) could find Timor. Barely a quarter correctly located Vietnam and, most surprising of all, barely one in five (21 per cent) could correctly locate Afghanistan. Fortunately, a further 36 per cent of the QUT students had "some idea" where it is. But more than two in five (42 per cent) had no idea.

The University of Queensland

At the University of Queensland, the "Geography Test" was administered to a group of second- and third-year students doing a subject in television journalism. There were 70 students enrolled in the course, but the numbers at lectures were much lower, varying from a "high" of about 50 to the mid-20s. The lecturer believes this had nothing to do with his teaching style and everything to do with the fact the lecture was scheduled at 8am on a Tuesday! Whatever the reason, the number completing the geography test was 48, although one student who was also in the JIS subject at QUT was eliminated from the sample.

The UQ sample was slightly older than the QUT group and also one to two years more advanced in their journalism training. The researchers felt this would act as a "control" and also as a reasonable comparison with the larger first-year QUT group.

Table 3: "News Geography" UQ Scores

Score	Number	Percentage	Progressive total	Progressive percentage
0 & 0.5 (1)	3	6.4	3	6.4
1	4	8.5	7	14.9
2 & 2.5 (3)	6	12.8	13	27.7
3 & 3.5 (4)	5	10.6	18	38.3
4 & 4.5 (0)	2	4.3	20	42.6
5 & 5.5 (1)	4	8.5	24	51.1
6 & 6.5 (3)	6	12.8	30	63.8
7 & 7.5 (2)	7	14.9	37	78.7
8 & 8.5 (2)	6	12.8	43	91.5
9	3	6.4	46	97.9
10	1	2.1	47	100.0

The most striking thing to note about the University of Queensland scores is that a further year of academic training had not significantly improved the students' knowledge of geography.

Table 4: Country recognition table (UQ)

Country	Located		Ball park		Total	
	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent
Cuba	18	38	10	21	28	60
N. Ireland	17	36	10	21	27	57
East Timor	10	21	8	17	18	38
Vietnam	9	19	5	11	14	30
South Korea	7	15	2	4	9	19
Zimbabwe	4	9	3	6	7	15
Israel	4	9	2	4	6	13
Afghanistan	3	6	5	11	8	17
Iraq	1	2	2	4	3	6
Somalia	0	0	3	6	3	6

At the University of Queensland, just over half could either locate or "roughly" position Cuba and Northern Ireland on the map and, as with students at QUT, these two countries topped the recognition table. However, the rest of the "top five" (East Timor, Vietnam and South Korea) were all in the bottom half of the QUT table. At UQ there was also a very dramatic fall-off in the percentage who could find these countries. All the top five scored 50 per cent or better recognition rates at QUT, but at UQ less than 40 per cent could position eight of the 10 choices. This discrepancy with the QUT results may be partially explained by the one week's "advance" notice that QUT students received about the test. At the University of Queensland, the students were given no warning and no opportunity to study an atlas prior to the test. Overall, it indicates that the students' general knowledge of geography is very low indeed.

How wrong can you be?

Just how much of “no idea” many students have about geography becomes clear when some of the interesting and hilarious “wrong” answers are analysed. When it came to the incorrect location of the various countries, both sets of students came up with some fascinating suggestions.

At QUT, three students thought Afghanistan was in Africa, another three in southern Europe. About 10 thought it was in Saudi Arabia, and one suggested near Beijing (another capital named on the map used for the test). The majority of incorrect answers placed Afghanistan in India or southern China. At the University of Queensland, the “most wrong” answer put Afghanistan near the Russian city of Omsk, and another located it in Mongolia.

One QUT student put Cuba in Greenland, another in eastern Russia, one in central Europe, another in Mali (Africa), and another in Algeria. Three put it in Florida (where many Cubans probably wish it was), while another nine went for the El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica region. A number of students at both campuses placed Cuba in various areas of South America, with Brazil and Peru the most popular. One University of Queensland student placed Cuba near the Pakistani city of Lahore, perhaps moved there by Castro’s desire to forge links of anti-American solidarity with the beleaguered Taliban.

Things improved for Timor. One QUT student thought it was in Finland, one put it in Oman, six placed it in China, and one each plumped for Vietnam, Taiwan and the Philippines. Another opted for New Caledonia. At both campuses, the majority of incorrect answers (about 30) placed Timor “in the region”, on Sumatra, Borneo, Sulawesi, West Irian, Papua New Guinea or New Britain.

Among the QUT students there were some innovative guesses about the location of Vietnam: variously in the far north Arctic region of Russia, Kazakhstan, Yemen, Oman, Japan, Taiwan, Pakistan, eastern Russia (eight), India (six), Sumatra (three), Borneo (four), the Philippines (six) and Indo China (eight). Even though Beijing was identified on the map, about 15 QUT students and several from UQ placed Vietnam in various areas of China.

The students were a little bit closer in their suggestions for Northern Ireland’s position: at QUT, with four exceptions, the “guesstimates” were roughly limited to European locations – like western Russia, Finland, Sweden, Norway, southern England, France, Germany, even Austria. The “exceptions” put Northern Ireland in Russia up near the Arctic Circle, far northern Canada, Alaska and on the west coast of the United States near Seattle.

QUT estimates for Iraq were mostly limited to the Middle East and Africa, although one suggested it was in southern France and another plugged for eastern India. The majority of incorrect answers had it in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan or other former Russian republics, as well as Saudi Arabia, Iran,

Syria, Jordan and Turkey. It was a bit hard to tell, given the small size of the map, but we're fairly sure a couple thought it was part of Israel.

Israel itself was another surprise. Fourteen QUT students thought it was in Africa – at least they opted for the “top half” of the continent. Several had it in the Poland/Estonia region, and several opted for southern China. One UQ student put the Jewish settler state in Kazakhstan, which would upset the Muslim majority there. The majority of incorrect answers in both cohorts, though, located it in neighbouring countries like Saudi Arabia, Iraq and, slightly further afield, Yemen, Afghanistan and Pakistan, even as far as India.

Seven students at QUT thought Zimbabwe was in South America. One thought it was on the border of West Irian and Papua New Guinea. The rest of the incorrect answers at least placed it somewhere in Africa. At QUT, about 17 plumped for the southern half of the continent, and another 14 thought it was somewhere north of the Equator. In both sets of results Somalia was variously placed near Boston, Bosnia, Borneo, Thailand, Greece, southern Sudan, southern China and Brazil. The rest knew it was somewhere in Africa. About a dozen had it below the Equator, and 20 or more opted for one of the African states north of the Equator (but none on the Mediterranean).

Finally, South Korea. One QUT student put it in Greece, another in Taiwan, 10 in various parts of Russia, another 10 thought it was in Japan, half a dozen thought the Philippines, four Sumatra, four Borneo, three Malaysia, eight Indo China and about 25 placed it along various parts of the Chinese Pacific coast.

So what does that tell you? Journalism students need to invest in an atlas!

Comparison with previous results

In the 2002 “Geography Test”, the QUT average was still under half marks (5/10) – but had improved from 3.1 for the CSU group in 1993 and 3.8 for CSU and 4.1 for UWS in 1998 – at 4.7. The median (mid mark) was 5.5 and the mode (most common mark) was 5/5.5. In 2002, more than two-thirds of the QUT cohort knew where Cuba is, a big improvement on both the CSU and UWS results from 1998.

The average mark at the University of Queensland was just on half (5/10), while the median was around 5 and the mode surprisingly high at 7/10. However, this may be misleading, as only five out of 47 students achieved this mark and the spread of marks was fairly evenly distributed, with four students each scoring 1, 3.5 and 8. Like QUT students, the UQ cohort scored fairly well in locating Cuba, but we must assume that having the capital “Havana” clearly marked on the map may have led to greater recognition. Even with this assistance, only 18 out of 47 students (38 per cent) could pinpoint its location.

An added twist for the new millennium

A month later, after the students had received their marks for the 2002 News Geography test, and had had time to discuss with their tutors the rationale for the test, they were given another general test – this time “News Numbers”. The QUT students were given two weeks’ notice of the test, although one week was the mid-semester break over Easter. They were told to watch for the numbers that appeared regularly, often daily, in local print and broadcast media. They were specifically told they would not be expected to be able to quote the prices of the most volatile shares, but to watch the share market in general and ask themselves what figures the media regularly quoted as a barometer of the state, national or international economy. The senior author tried his best not to “give the game away” (since he considered there were a finite number of figures that could be tested), but thought he’d pointed them in the right direction. In summary, it revolved around the exchange rates of the Aussie dollar, gold and oil prices, the stock exchange index, the national unemployment rate, the current housing loan interest rate and average weekly earnings in Australia. At QUT it was the lead-in to the first-year mass lecture on maths for journalists.

For ease of overall assessment later, and to give the students a bonus if they tried, it was decided to mark the test out of 20, with two marks for a correct answer and one for “around about” the appropriate figure. By this time, there’d been about a 5 per cent dropout rate in the course (the test being held after the HECS census date), and of the 202 students still enrolled in the QUT course, 173 turned up to take the test. The mean was 8.68, median 8, and mode also 8. A little over 50 per cent got 8 or less; 92 per cent managed 12 or less. One student, from Norway, got 0, and the top mark of 17 was shared by two students – including, surprisingly, another from Norway. She had managed only 3.5 for the geography test.

The cross-institutional student managed 11 when she took the test at QUT, but was away on Army Reserve exercises on the day the test was held at the University of Queensland.

Table 5: QUT "numbers" test results 2002

Mark	No.	Per cent	Cumulative total	Cumulative percentage
0	1	0.6	1	0.6
1	0	0	1	0.6
2	4	2.3	5	2.9
3	2	1.1	7	4.0
4	9	5.2	16	9.2
5	9	5.2	12	14.4
6	16	9.2	41	23.7
7	19	10.9	60	34.6
8	27	15.6	87	50.2
9	13	7.5	100	57.8
10	20	11.5	120	69.3
11	19	11	139	80.3
12	21	12.1	160	92.4
13	5	2.9	165	95.3
14	5	2.9	170	98.2
15	1	0.6	171	98.9
16	0	0	171	98.9
17	2	1.1	173	100

The seven QUT postgraduate students in the group that did the test returned an above-average performance, averaging 9.7, but substantially down on their performance in the geography test.

The QUT overseas students were not expected to perform well in this test, given its "local" nature. But, surprisingly, one registered the equal top mark – 17. At the other end of the scale, the lone student to register 0 was in this group. Their overall average was exactly 7, below the class average but an improvement on their performance in the geography test.

When it came to the results for the various questions, it was obvious nearly all knew what the Aussie dollar was worth that day in American cents, but not much else. The question answered correctly by the most students (91.3 per cent) was the exchange rate for the Aussie dollar in US cents. Then followed arguably the easiest question in the test – was the unemployment rate in Queensland higher or lower than the national average? It was a 50/50 bet and still nearly 40 per cent got it wrong.

Table 6: QUT "numbers" test results by question

Question	Correct	Per cent	Ball park	Per cent	Position
1	158	91.3	5	2.9	1
2	67	38.7	19	11	4
3	43	24.8	77	44.5	7
4	25	14.5	53	30.6	8
5	99	57.2	28	16.1	3
6	6	3.4	1	0.6	9
7	105	60.7	-	-	2
8	55	31.8	40	23.1	6
9	64	37	6	3.4	5
10	3	1.7	19	11	10

At the University of Queensland, only 33 students were present in the lecture to take the "numbers" test and they were given no warning about it. It might therefore be expected that the overall scores would be lower than those of the QUT cohort.

Table 7: UQ "numbers" test results 2002

Mark	No.	Per cent	Cumulative total	Cumulative percentage
0.5	1	3.0	1	3.0
1	2	6.1	3	9.1
2	2	6.1	5	15.2
3	2	6.1	7	21.2
4	4	12.1	11	33.3
4.5	2	6.1	13	39.4
5	3	9.1	16	48.5
6	3	9.1	19	57.6
8	1	3.0	20	60.6
9	2	6.1	22	66.7
10	1	3.0	23	69.7
11	4	12.1	27	81.8
12	2	6.1	29	87.9
13	2	6.1	31	93.9
14	2	6.1	33	100.0

Table 8: UQ "numbers test results by question

Question	Correct	Per cent	Ball park	Per cent	Position
1	21	63.6	6	18.2	1
2	14	42.4	10	30.3	2
3	13	39.4	1	3.0	6
4	7	21.2	5	15.2	7
5	15	45.5	5	15.2	3
6	0	0.0	3	9.1	10
7	16	48.5	0	0.0	5
8	3	9.1	6	18.2	8
9	11	33.3	9	27.3	4
10	1	3.0	5	15.2	9

While more than half of the QUT students knew to within half a per cent the national unemployment figure (Q5), only six of the 173 could translate the percentage into an actual figure. The unemployment rate at the time was 6.7 per cent, and the Australian Bureau of Statistics said that meant a total of 670,000 people were out of a job. A similar story is revealed by the UQ figures for this question. Just over 60 per cent could "guesstimate" the percentage, but only three out of 33 were even in the "ball park" when it came to the actual figures. Most UQ students either did not attempt this question, or gave outrageous figures from a low of 50,000 to highs in the millions. Some actually tried to work it out but gave up, the maths obviously beyond them. The closest answer was "600,000". At UQ, no student was able to correctly guess the figure.

When it came to "guessing" the number of unemployed in Australia, the QUT students came up with some amazing answers. One said it was 9,258,600, and another said "lots". Six suggested figures between one and two million, which, given the way the ABS calculated the figure, is probably closer to the "real" state of unemployment in Australia. At the bottom end of the scale were the politicians' dreams, the students who thought the figure was 2500, 15,000, 17,000, 19,000 or 20,000. There were six students who thought the figure was between 100,000 and 200,000.

The question with the least number of correct answers (three, or 1.7 per cent of the QUT class) was number 10, which asked about average weekly earnings. At the time, the figure was \$850. This question ranked 9th at UQ, with only one correct answer and five "ball park" responses. Most guesstimates were way too low, averaging around the \$350 to \$400 mark. Some UQ students obviously misread the question and gave what must be interpreted as annual salary figures, but again these were on the low side (\$28,000 to \$33,000). The closest guesstimates were in the \$650 to \$1000 range.

Some equally astounding numbers came forth when the QUT students estimated average weekly earnings. One must have been thinking of the Captains of Industry when he suggested a figure of \$50,000 *per week*. Another thought

it was \$20,000, another thought it was \$25,000 and two agreed on \$27,300. At the bottom end of the scale, one thought it was \$190: or was that their dole or Austudy cheque? A total of 27 – nearly 16 per cent – thought the figure was between \$200 and \$500, and most of those thought it was below \$400. The 19 QUT students who were given one mark for being in the “ball park” only had to guess within \$100 either way – between \$750 and \$950.

The relatively high score for Question 8 (the housing loan interest rate) is possibly inflated because they were asked for the percentage within one per cent either way, so anything from 5.5 per cent to 7.5 per cent was correct, given that the figure was 6.5 per cent at the time. Even so, only half the students at QUT were close and at UQ just over a quarter could hazard a good guess.

Can we relate “scores” to intellect?

The researchers were interested to establish whether there was a link between students’ scores on the geography and numbers tests and their intellectual ability as measured by two standard indicators. For the first-year students at QUT, the chosen measure was the Queensland tertiary entrance ranking (or “OP” score) achieved in statewide examinations in 2001. An OP of “1” is the highest ranking and means the student was in the top 2 per cent in the state and “8” (the lowest for those entering QUT journalism in 2002) denotes that the student finished in the top 15 per cent of the state. For the cohort of second- and third-year students at the University of Queensland, the chosen measure was the students’ grade point average (GPA), which measures grades in their studies to date.

Two of the top three QUT students who each returned a perfect score in the geography test entered the course with OP scores of five, while the third was a non-OP entrant, probably a mature-age student. There were two students in the QUT cohort with the highest OP entry scores of 1. One managed 9, while the other had an off day, returning a score of 2.5. Of the seven students with OPs of 2, two scored 9 and one managed 7. The lowest score among the OP 2 group was 2.5. They averaged 5.8, well above the overall average.

Another way to compare the individual results in the QUT group is to split the group into the main degree groups that take the subject. It is compulsory for the two double degrees – the Journalism/Law and Journalism/Business degrees – and the Bachelor of Journalism degree. There’s also a Journalism major in the new Bachelor of Creative Industries, which took its first intake in 2002.

Comparative results on the QUT geography test

The Journalism/Law degree had the highest OP cut-off (5), followed by Journalism/Business (6), Bachelor of Journalism (7) and the Bachelor of Creative Industries (8).

The group is further broken down into those with an OP score and "others" – mainly mature-age, but also including interstate and overseas students and a small number of transferees from other QUT courses and other journalism courses. While almost all the QUT students have an OP-equivalent score, for the purpose of this comparison we used the OP scores of those who completed Year 12 of high school in Queensland in 2001.

As mentioned earlier, there was even one University of Queensland student who was taking JIS as a cross-institutional student. She did the test first at QUT and got 9. Faced with the same test a fortnight later at UQ, she returned a perfect score, but the authors decided to consider her first near-perfect score for this comparison. In the Journalism/Law category, a total of 28 students took the geography test – 20 with OPs of 5 and above and eight "others". The six with OPs of 2 or 3 (none had an OP of 1) averaged almost 5 (4.9). Overall, the OP students averaged 5.4. The "others" averaged only 3.1.

In the Journalism/Business cohort, a total of 40 took the geography test – 25 with OPs of 6 or better and 15 "others". The eight with OPs from 1 to 3 (including one with an OP 1) averaged 6.1, while overall the OP cohort averaged 5.4. The 15 "others" averaged exactly 5.

The Bachelor of Journalism group totalled 68 – 32 with OPs of 7 or better, and 36 "others". In the geography test, the four QUT students with OPs of 3 or better (including another OP 1) averaged a lowly 4.5, while overall the OP group averaged the same score. The "others" averaged slightly lower at 4.3.

Among the Bachelor of Creative Industries group, there were a total of 31 – 19 with OPs of 8 or better, and 12 "others". The top five students, with OPs of 2 or 3, averaged 5.3, while the average for the OP group overall was 5.1. The "others" in this category did comparatively better, averaging 5.9.

A small group of Graduate Diploma journalism students was included in the group. All but one (seven) took the test and, not surprisingly, they averaged well above the undergraduate group, returning an average of 6.9, including two with 9.5 and another with 9.

The other group worth examining was the overseas fee-paying group. Of the 11 from Norway, nine took the test and averaged 5.7. They included two with 8.5, one with seven and two with six. Of the three from Singapore, two took the test, and averaged 2.5. The lone overseas student from Sweden returned a slightly above average score of 5.5.

Comparative results on the QUT numbers test

In the Journalism/Law category, of the 27 who took the test, there were again 20 with OPs of 5 or above and seven "others". The six with OPs of 2 or 3 averaged 8 out of a possible 20 marks. Overall, the OP students averaged

8.75, slightly down on their performance in the geography test. The "others" (mature-age students, transferees from other universities, students from interstate and overseas) averaged 6.3, about the same as their geography scores.

In the Journalism/Business category, a total of 36 took the test, 23 with OPs of 6 or better and 13 "others". The lone OP 1 in this group, who managed 9 out of 10 for the geography test, went one better this time and scored 17, the equal (with one other, the student from Norway) top score in the test. The six with OPs between 1 and 3 averaged just under half marks (9.75), down on their marks for the geography test. The overall OP average was slightly less and again down on the geography mark at 9.17. The "others" averaged 8.5, about the same as their scores in the earlier test.

The Bachelor of Journalism participants totalled 62, 28 with OPs of 7 or better and 34 "others". The four with OPs of 3 or better averaged 9.0, well below their geography test average. The OP group averaged 8.6 (also down) and the "others" averaged slightly less – 8.3 – identical to their geography test average.

In the Bachelor of Creative Industries group, 29 took the test, 18 with OPs of 8 or better and 11 "others". The top five students (with OPs of 2 or 3) averaged exactly 9, again down on their geography average. The OP group as a whole averaged precisely 8 (down again). The "others" dropped back to average 6.3, substantially down on their geography average.

The University of Queensland

The student cohort at UQ was sorted by Grade Point Average (GPA) and then the geography and numbers test scores were mapped against GPA, as presented in the following table.

Table 9: UQ results correlated with GPA (averages)

GPA range	Geography	Number	GPA
1.9-3.75	3.9	5.1	3
4.13-4.88	4.1	3.3	4.5
5-5.9	5.7	3.4	5.4
6.13-6.23	7.5	4	6.2

Students with a GPA of 3+ averaged 3.9 in the Geography Test, with a low score of 1 and a high of 6.5. The average was slightly higher for students with a GPA of 4+, at 4.1. Again the low score in this group was 1, the high this time 8.5. In other words, the average mark in the group with a GPA of less than 5 was a "fail", less than 5/10. The group with a GPA of 5 or better managed to "pass" the geography test, but the low in this group was 0 and the high score a 9. Eight students in this group managed 7.5 or better, and most passed.

However, six out of the 17 in the GPA 5+ still managed to “fail”. The bulk of the group was in the 5+ GPA range and for this cohort the average score jumped to 5.7, but the low in this group was the lone student who scored 0 and the high was two students with a 9 and four students with an 8. No doubt the average in this group was brought down by the 0.

In the group with a GPA of 6+ (7 is the highest and implies perfect HDs all the way through), the average score was 7.5, the low had jumped to 3.5 and the high was a perfect 10. One other student scored a 9.

In the numbers test a few weeks later, the student with the lowest GPA (1.9) scored 13.5/20, which was the second-highest mark for the UQ contingent. Two students did slightly better, with a 14. Both had a GPA of 5+.

Overall, the UQ group did badly on the numbers test. Perhaps this can be explained by the lack of warning. The QUT-based researcher had warned his students that the test was coming and it was an assessable exercise. For the UQ cohort, the numbers test came as a complete surprise.

The 3+ GPA group averaged 8.75, with a low of 4.5 and a high of 13. The 4+ group averaged 6.6, with a low of 1 and a high of 12. The 5+ students averaged 6.7, with a low of 0.5 and high of 14. The 6+ GPA students averaged 8, with a low of 3 and a high of 14.

The UQ geography test results seem to indicate some correlation between GPA and test scores, with both the average and the high result increasing with GPA. However, the numbers test indicates no such link. The highs in each group were all over 12, and the low scores were not consistent with GPA either.

Conclusions and suggestions

In the opinion of the authors, this small study says more about the general knowledge of students and their ability to engage with the news agenda than it does about their geographic or numeric/mathematics skills. For the numbers test, it is clear that anything more than a passing familiarity with issues in the news would facilitate a reasonable score. That most students could identify the correct exchange rate for the \$A is interesting. Perhaps this score is boosted by the numbers of international students studying at both UQ and QUT. They would be very conscious of the exchange rate. Maybe it says something about the sorts of information that the students retain from their news reading and viewing.

The correlation of scores against the OP and the GPA for these students is not strong, suggesting that innate “intelligence” is not a factor: rather the emphasis is on the socialisation of journalism students into a culture of “thinking” about and “observing” the news going on around them.

As journalism educators we cannot hope to also teach our students more

about the world's physical and political geography. That is why we insist, as do most editors and media employers, that journalism majors also take courses in the broader humanities and sciences. This is actively encouraged. What we have to attempt with our student journalists is to help them integrate forms of factual knowledge about the world with ways of thinking like a news reporter. That is, a sense of "news geography" combined with the curiosity to find out more and the ability to store information away for the day they need it in a hurry.

There are obvious ways in which the research reported here can be improved and/or extended. For example, it is apparent to the authors that measuring factual retention from news events and reportage is a better way of measuring "news geography" than just pinpointing locations on a map. The authors intend to explore this further and would welcome an opportunity to broaden the research base to other journalism programs in Australia and internationally. It is common practice to include current affairs testing in the curriculum of many journalism subjects. No doubt interesting data has been collected over several years regarding the results of such examinations. A careful analysis of this data along the lines of the research reported here could be a valuable tool in tailoring journalism courses to better teach "news sense".

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