Reflections and Insights from Post Graduate Pandemic Delivery in Scotland

Author Bio

Dr. James Mahon is a media lecturer and former BA Journalism course leader based in Scotland. He has worked in higher education for almost 8 years at UWS, University of Glasgow and Stirling University. His professional background is as a TV reporter, and he is still an active freelancer with ITV Border and ITN Business. Mahon’s research focus has primarily focused on digital and mobile journalism with his PhD fieldwork taking place in India, Switzerland and the US. Mahon’s post-doctoral work explores the impact of the pandemic on graduates and on teaching approaches. His work has been published in The Conversation and The Royal Society and presented at the Global Media Education Summit and MECCSA in 2023.

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9222-0013?lang=en

@JamesMahonTV

James.mahon@uws.ac.uk
ABSTRACT

Journalism education and modular delivery has seen significant shifts and changes with curricular trends, technological influence and institutional led reform impacting media pedagogy over the last 20 years. Educators have altered their approaches from in person delivery and written exams, to portfolio assessments, to pre-recorded and remote video assignments. However, it was the influence of the covid-19 pandemic in spring 2020 that altered how and where we teach and led to wider changes during a much shorter amount of time than had been seen previously.

This piece of research draws on written student feedback from the delivery of a practical MA broadcast journalism module at the beginning, during and after the pandemic coupled with reflections from the module leader.

The article points particular attention to the influence of industry partners and the author’s own professional media practice as influencing the changes in how the module evolved each year of academic delivery.

This study also examines relevant literature and provides recommendations for educators delivering on practical media courses with a focus on graduate destinations and employability.

Keywords- Pedagogy, Journalism Education, Remote Learning, Digital Poverty, Communication Studies.
Introduction

Upon first being informed in early March 2020 that we would have to remain off campus, initially for 3 weeks I approached several national broadcasters in Scotland to explore and understand how they were pivoting during the covid crisis. Bauer Media UK accepted my request to join their radio newsroom for a week at the beginning of lockdown to receive bulletin editor training and guidance while the pandemic restrictions were creating confusion and panic in wider society. A growing body of work has since emerged surrounding higher education and the impact of the pandemic including from an Australian study by Doidge and Doyle (2022). Their research points to the risks and concerns surrounding non-STEM subjects during the beginning of covid-19 with many education leaders not seeing humanities courses as being worthy of support due to concerns over post-pandemic employment pathways.

Through exploring the aforementioned industry relationship, I was able to gain inside insights into how to alter our teaching model to best represent then emerging industry practices surrounding remote broadcasting and virtual newsrooms. Building on this I held a group session with my current MA cohort at the time and we reflected on their learning journey to date while openly evaluating their current skillsets and technical abilities. Through this approach I was able to isolate what the students would need in order to be trained and educated from home, including using bespoke hardware and software to support their off campus learning with in person delivery no longer an option. The importance of this time for media education and impact of technology is further echoed in the work of Nyarko and Serwornoo (2022) who explain the shift from brick-and-mortar teaching to remote and virtual
needs. Their work points to the expectations for educators to take ownership and make key decisions. What was apparent at this point was how I could not wait for others within the institution to take the lead but instead had to isolate what industry was doing and in turn incorporate key elements of that into MA delivery within days of the first lockdown announcement.

Further to this, new workflows and access to relevant learning material would need to be created to support student cohorts. To remove major disruption to the student experience I requested remote Adobe software licences for all students to allow them to remain at home during this early stage of the pandemic. Building on this I took control of my own CPD and retrained on Adobe creative suite maximising online tutorials at night-time to then be able to support student and collegiate learning across all software which already included Final Cut, Avid and Audacity.

Due to my concern about also contracting the virus during these first few weeks of the pandemic and not thus being able to support fellow employees, I created an online repository using YouTube, Microsoft Teams and Moodle, containing tutorial videos that presented walk through guides to provide self-training resources for colleagues and students who could use them at home along with their new Adobe Licenses. The first few weeks of lockdown were ones of great worry, and this was reflected in the turbulence in HE including what was required with the practical MA module in question. I had to take a course that was delivered in person on campus since the 1990s and move it to Microsoft Teams, changing the software, the outputs and the expectations for staff and students. The emotional impact of the early stages of the pandemic on university education led to anxiety amongst student bodies in many institutions, Karalisis and Rakou (2020) have found that this did reduce in the months after
March 2020, but student bodies remained worried about their ability to complete studies and were worried about graduating in 2020.

**Early Pandemic Problems and Solutions**

What became obvious during these initial weeks of spring 2020 was first how quickly the media industry was changing and secondly how newer challenges were presenting themselves from the student body, echoing the work of Quandt and Wahl-Jorgensen (2021). One of these included digital poverty and with that came the need to support students with laptop rentals as well as address social and ethical dilemmas surrounding gathering content from home instead of from the university learning spaces. Harper (2023) refers to how libraries and institutions pivoted to loan schemes to help students who not only couldn’t access computers but were also impacted due to furlough financially restricting them from affording personal devices during the covid-19 pandemic in the UK. In addition, a third factor I observed while working at a widening access institution was the backlog in orders of IT and computer equipment due to travel limitations and logistics. All of these factors limited student experiences and created a discernible inequality within student bodies.

In order to try to foresee potential issues and challenges, closer alignment with our specialised digital learning technologists as well as media library team provided support to the journalism teaching team and others, which I felt was necessary as programme leader during this tumultuous period. During this frenetic first month or two of the pandemic I continued to engage with the media industry both with reporters and editors at broadcast and
digital outlets, while adjusting assessment needs to support the new modular delivery which would be online and from home but also in line with curricular expectations.

Open communication channels for student groups and educators were an area I focused on more throughout 2020, especially as in person feedback, including over the shoulder support and advice couldn’t be provided in a classroom setting.

Anonymous feedback was presented by the MA module attendees in the summer of 2020 and helped shape and form delivery which remained remote again in autumn 2020. Some of the MA student feedback is included here.

“Practical elements so far have been good but more detailed communication between me, and lecturers could be more frequent”.

“More of the pitching stories”

“Fantastic teachers working under very difficult circumstances”.

“Lecturers clearly experts in their field and always available for feedback and guidance - definitely improved under their guidance”.

It was clear the students understood the need for open dialogue and discourse and appreciated being able to help shape the course delivery as it remained in a full remote capacity for a new cohort of students from September to December of 2020.

Deborah Wilson, the external examiner for this BJTC accredited MA in Broadcast Journalism further refers to the impact of the feedback in her external examiner report,
“The feedback as always is well considered, thorough, and supports students through the work they still have to come in their course of study”.

To demonstrate a calm, effective and supportive approach during these first 18 months of the lockdown. I upskilled at every opportunity from WordPress and CMS to SEO and used this information and new media knowledge gained from NUJ and ITV Zoom and Google Hangout training courses to be a reassuring and able presence to address student and staff needs.

Added to this was the need to foster a new remote newsroom community that had not existed previously to encourage student participation and inclusion. This was done through a combination of Microsoft Teams drop in spaces and an upgrading of uwsnewsroom.com and with support from within my division I was able to design, build and curate a new media website to support staff to help get student content outwardly facing on a professional web platform.

Through remaining available, skilled, and approachable to both staff and students, the MA cohort swiftly adjusted to the new remote learning cycle in a supported and controlled way during an otherwise unsettled period.

What also became evident was the need for more sustained in-depth video and written feedback via Microsoft Teams and by adding drop-in sessions, student bodies and class groups could sustain a social outlet and remove the fear of isolation. I also created a digital
Teams space where students could relay their concerns to staff which allowed more open communication for both parties to make everyone feel included in addressing any extra learning concerns. It also alleviated pressure on individual staff inboxes as the drop in digital space issues could be dealt with by the group of educators in a supportive manner on Microsoft Teams versus isolated solo correspondences.

The second MA covid cohort, who undertook the module in autumn 2020 reinforced the views of the first group that we were providing a positive remote learning experience.

‘Good to be set practical tasks - Provided feedback’.

“Being fun and interactive and really responsive to student enquiries with subjective feedback”.

“The helpfulness of all the staff”

My aims during this time were not only to provide supportive and effective remote teaching, learning and assessment but I also felt it was paramount to still engage the students with fresh views and insights and therefore created an international guest series with expert speakers who were also isolating at home, they included media leaders from CNN and PA and other global outlets. This gave the students reassurance and insights from professional practice workplaces they aspired to be in that we were all in this challenging time together.

Coupled with this it also took some added pressure off fellow media lecturers who could use the time to focus on grading and cross marking while the guest speakers engaged the student
groups and therefore reduce staff burnout. Drawing on our alumni network played a big role here with so many of them working journalists who were also restricted at home.

**Evolving and Progressing Pedagogy Through the Pandemic**

To retain graduate attributes and employment pathways I held a series of 1 on 1 sessions with industry partners in early 2020 and again in January 2021 about remote work experience options for our students. In some instances, the option to send students into some form of work experience was rejected but by being able to evidence the body of audio, video, and multimedia work I had helped the students create from home via our new remote media space, many industry employers felt encouraged by our student body and took them on in remote capacities during the pandemic. The focus on learning by doing (Gibbs, 1988) (Kolb, 1984) despite the pandemic restrictions was a methodology that was infused in the class groups and informed pedagogy.

Through this there was minimal disruption to the class learning journey and reduced issues pertaining to other assessment and module needs. These remote work experience shifts with both digital, print and radio outlets also provided me with an opportunity to reflect and enhance remote delivery through receiving student and employer feedback to create what was to then become a hybrid pedagogy approach once some pandemic restrictions lifted in later months.

Once again, this 2021-2022 MA class was surveyed to gain insights into how to progress and support learning. The students appreciated the focus on editing and production skills and also
how they could still engage with suitable work-related learning and multimedia placement pathways.

“*The technical sessions worked well*”.

“*The opportunities provided were exceptional, and I have consistently felt pushed in my work*”.

All MA cohorts received robust and enhanced teaching during Covid-19 due to the swiftness and agility of pivoting delivery and supporting staff and this was reflected not only in their module evaluations but also in the employment and graduate roles of the student bodies during and after Covid-19 (Nyarko and Serwornoo, 2022). The graduating classes could evidence a body of work that other university graduates couldn’t from similar practical postgraduate courses which during 2020 and 2021 hadn’t provided any practical journalism output or any relevant work experience. Deuze (2019) had explained prior to the pandemic the importance of multimedia and digital content production and fortunately for the class this did not stop despite the challenges presented by covid.

One significant shift in the delivery of teaching was the creation of a production journalist role on campus to remove the need for students to be onsite. The technical role was taken by a graduate of the institution who was limited with employment options during the pandemic and meant that cloud-based broadcast options and pathways to receive audio newswire materials from Burli Radio software and IRN could still get to students and therefore they could create on the hour broadcast outputs relying on Zoom, Teams and Google Drive. This workaround allowed students to remain abreast of news topics and engage with radio
scripting while creating industry standard output in the same vein and workflow as regional and national radio stations. In addition, it took pressure and expectation off teaching staff to be on campus or travel beyond their permitted lockdown borders, which in Scotland at the time was county by county, as the production journalist in question was based within a few miles of the campus.

When it came to applying for graduate roles, the MA students in question had such a body of multimedia material that other cohorts hadn’t and in some cases some journalists in the newsroom they were applying to hadn’t attained that they were not only industry ready but ahead of the expectations from some employers (Quandt and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021). In learning that studio access was not an option I had created a virtual remote pathway using cloud services and social networks coupled with MS Teams and Zoom platforms to still deliver Live and As Live audio and video outputs.

All of this outward facing journalism content was available for prospective employers to engage with via WordPress, Wix, Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and Soundcloud platforms. This not only was exploratory for the student body but also for me as the lecturer leading it and allowed for us to grow and develop our own workflow which led to high student pass rates and module satisfaction.

In addition to supporting students and staff during this time I in turn harnessed some of my own creative practice skills and solo shot and produced a covid secure international TV documentary for CBS television stations in America in 2021. The documentary explored the links between the Scottish Highlands and the bible belt of America with the final piece entitled the Scotch-Irish Songs of the South, https://www.wdef.com/scots-irish-songs-south/.
It became a learning tool I could draw on both for my student cohorts and one to be utilised as a practical real-world demonstration of a pandemic mobile and remote video production in the journalism and media space.

Due to the success of the remote newsroom teaching approaches and the TV documentary I was asked to present a series of guest lectures for other institutions in the UK and overseas including at Nottingham Trent University and Glasgow University and being selected as the keynote speaker at several conferences. Through this I was able to demonstrate the importance of having close industry relationships at times of crisis while being able to support fellow educators and in turn showcase the importance of staff remaining digitally savvy and skilled. This allows educators to be in positions to impact virtual and remote pedagogy and to enhance and drive student learning. These remote sessions and conferences allowed me to gain further peer review feedback and incorporate that into my delivery and the modular approach in the months after some of the pandemic restrictions lifted. An interesting takeaway from these sessions was the number of teaching and technical staff who joined the guest lecture series, and, in many instances, they were the ones asking the most questions to in turn shape their courses and delivery accordingly.

This time throughout 2020 and 2021 while of great social instability offered me a chance to bring my own experiences and resources into an emerging teaching space and support students and colleagues during their own challenging period. Since restrictions have been lifted, good practice from this time has been incorporated and emerged into teaching and assessment moving forward (Garcia-Aviles, 2021). This creates a hybrid learning experience for students that draws on VLE, Remote Newsrooms, Online Newsroom scenarios and in person workshops and lectures. Part of this legacy has also been the employment and
graduate successes of both covid graduating classes who have enjoyed professional media
careers and in turn have fed back into student delivery by offering work placements and job
opportunities to current student groups through to 2023.

The Current Blended Approach

Scotland was one of the last developed world countries to remove all pandemic related
restrictions and with the course not running in 2022 the first cohort undertaking an on-
campus delivery were the class of 2023-2024. The module has not returned to a full onsite
focus but instead has retained some of the key elements that made it effective during
lockdown. These include remote news days, remote broadcasting, reliance on digital media
creation and social media news days, video story pitching and of course the importance of
feedback. With the module concluding in December 2023 some of the anonymous MA
student feedback is evidenced below.

“Practice, practice and practice”

“The radio aspect of the module”

“Emulating a newsroom environment was effective in getting me into the right mindset,
so that was good”.

“Learned about online stories, radio bulletin and content gathering”. 
Mirroring newsrooms across Scotland many of the editorial meetings are now done via Zoom and Teams with technology once again shaping pedagogy and assessment.

The removal of radio studio limitations has been enabled by a greater focus on mobile audio and video solutions. These include the use of Rodecasters for bulletin production and recording allowing students to be taught off campus and at active news and sporting events, further enhancing the student experience. In addition to this the broadcast anywhere approach of radio stations has been enabled by remote newsroom software including Myriad. The in-browser system can be accessed via Google Chrome and enables students to script and compile radio news material off campus and with industry focused technology.

While radio stations have changed their output and workflows it is also in video capturing where the MA students need to excel. This has led to zoom recording workshops which involve focus on framing and lighting to support remote video capturing. To augment remote interviewing, mobile journalism kits have been upgraded with Rode wireless microphones to encourage off campus content gathering and production skills. Supporting this is Adobe Rush for mobile devices which allows students the freedom to edit on the go and away from geographical or infrastructure limitations.

To enhance their learning journey visiting broadcast and digital news editors have supported their assessment cycle both in person and remotely to contribute to making the learning experience as real world as possible in preparation for work experience pathways and graduate employment.
Throughout the pandemic I continued to run industry and recruiting events with hiring editors and graduates of the MA course contributing to panel discussions through streaming platforms. While these have returned to on campus the creation of a robust LinkedIn alumni group during lockdown which I curate, now provides a digital as well as in person network for current MA students to share and apply for roles and to get extra feedback and input on their portfolios of multimedia content.

In addition, a shift away from pure journalism skills teaching to transferrable ones has come to the fore in light of the cost-of-living crisis. With fewer traditional broadcast journalism roles available in Scotland and growing sectors in public relations and inhouse sports club media roles, the module has embraced an assessment strategy that deploys a mixed approach. It involves on campus radio sessions, off campus content gathering events and remote multimedia and social media news days that allow students a wider array of social media platforms to evidence their work supporting the views of Neto, et al (2021) surrounding digital journalism expectations.

Insert Table 1 Here
Despite issues pertaining to Brexit, fallout from the pandemic and conflict in Ukraine and Israel, international recruitment has remained reasonably strong for this MA course with primarily domestic students excelling with employment pathways upon modular completion.

This in turn has led to a concentration on employability attributes with workshops which support students from both home and abroad, these take a look at the importance of media demo reels, cv writing workshops, website design, tailored work experience pathways and use of individual journalism digital portfolios to augment the student module outputs that are published to branded university sites and channels.

One area that has returned to in person has been studio tours and Q and A sessions at media houses, Global Radio and STV have both met with students from the module in 2023 and have given the cohorts in person support. This was something which was absent during the pandemic with employees of these media outlets also at home and unable to demonstrate the workflows and dynamics of their newsroom. These tours and on-site sessions are also more impactful for networking with many graduate students keen to explore freelance media employment while undertaking studies due to the cost-of-living crisis that is impacting large groups of people in the west and central belt of Scotland (Broadbent, 2023).

Over the 3 months of delivery for this same module in autumn 2023, 20% was conducted remotely via Zoom, 30% was provided off campus at industry sites and media press conferences and 50% was provided through in class on campus sessions. This blended approach to teaching augmented with an array of online resources and tutorials has allowed students to tailor their learning journey and have variety across where and how they gain broadcast and digital skills and enhance their learning.
The assessment approach over a five-day week in early December 2023 also took a blended approach with radio news days conducted on campus but with the option for mobile production including using Myriad News Anywhere, smartphones, tablets, laptops, app recording, Rodecasters and Zoom interviewing. The multimedia news days were all conducted remotely drawing on Zoom, VLE and WordPress as well focused one-to-one video feedback. Finally, the last day of their news week was conducted as press conferences at a sports facility in Glasgow with in person interviewing for social media channels, vertical outputs and evidence of mobile editing.

The assessment days were all supported by the module leader and a team of experienced editors and educators, with safety and security now a key focus for journalism educators (Murphy, 2020). The students were given consistent deadlines and expectations to evidence rounded and robust portfolios that demonstrate their skillsets and journalistic attributes in a post-pandemic news environment.
Conclusions and Recommendations

I feel this reflection shows the importance of remaining adaptable in higher education. From the MA module journey which started on campus in January 2020 to pivoting to remote delivery in March 2020 to remain remote in 2020 and 2021 and return to a blended approach in September 2023. Educators need to demonstrate an array of attributes including leadership, versatility, and creativity (Schindler, 2011), all of which can be enhanced through their own professional practice to support and develop effective student learning and support fellow educators.

Lecturers who are module leaders can take control and show impetus during challenging times to alter teaching, assessment, feedback and enhance student mentorship. Professional development is also vital as institutions expect more from lecturers and a focus on upskilling and retraining needs to be given priority by line managers.

Throughout the module journey student communication went from being a lecturer in a classroom to two-way communication across digital platforms and returned to a mix of both. Taking on board student needs, demands and expectations allowed for the module to develop and also demonstrated that student views were valued at a time of great instability and change.

The success of the graduates and current MA students in gaining media employment has led to increased numbers enrolling and more input from alumni into current teaching. Through
drawing on students past and present and exposing their work and our teaching approaches to media industry leaders, educators, accrediting bodies and news editors has allowed a rigid radio module to become a remote digital newsroom experience with outputs across video, audio, and social media channels that has attracted 41,000 views from digital audiences.

The old adage of build it and they will come rings true here but what also remains pertinent is after building you should keep up the repairs and maintenance so that modules and courses are as prepared as they can be to weather any storm.
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