

NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE TRAINING OF JOURNALISTS

Review of the NCE

Putting the focus on the National Certificate Examination

Report by Paul Watson

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This review was carried out in the spring of 2011. It looks at the NCE, how the industry regards it and what needs to be done to ensure it remains the “benchmark” in modern newsrooms

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2 Executive Summary

The NCE is held in high regard by those within the NCTJ's traditional "constituency"

It remains a good test

It reflects traditional and on-going values: accuracy, unique content and good story-telling skills

It is a national scheme, to a standard that everyone understands

Testing of the core skills of journalism should be at the heart of the test

The NCE should continue to concentrate on the fundamentals of the job

Examination papers should reflect the way newsrooms are working but it is noted that systems and procedures for digital publishing vary greatly across the country

The NCE is used as a recruiting tool by editors

The value of the NCE "currency" has risen as the number of jobs has declined

The four current components of the NCE all achieve high approval ratings

General

The NCE remains a good test and needs to continue to develop so as to reflect what goes on in most newsrooms; particularly in the way reporters operate and deal with digital publishing.

It must be noted that systems for digital publishing across the country vary greatly.

Logbook

There is widespread support for the Logbook with it being seen as a good innovation. Some sections are becoming harder for some candidates to fulfil, especially those working on small weeklies in rural areas.

The Logbook was designed as a means of attaining on-going training for newcomers to the industry. It should put trainees and editors into regular contact for review sessions. There is evidence this is not happening in all cases with some Logbooks being put together at the "last minute".

Newspaper Practice

The law questions are seen as vital.

The Press Complaints Commission Editors' Code of Practice should become a feature of every Newspaper Practice paper.

Ideas are seen as the lifeblood of publishers and there is a widespread belief the NCE should contain some element of testing how reporters would tackle and develop stories.

News Interview

The overwhelming view is that there is a need to test face-to-face interviewing skills.

In an ideal world there would be an opportunity to test telephone interviewing skills.

There are concerns that some interviewees do a poor job.

Where reporters work without competition, this is one of the few occasions when it is possible to tell whether a reporter has got the story or missed it.

It is a good test of accuracy.

News Report

The speech part of this paper is seen by many candidates as a shorthand test.

It is a good test of accuracy

3 Introduction

Background

News organisations have implemented major changes in the last five years to try and minimise the effects of the economic downturn. Newspapers have seen revenues slide and circulations fall. Digital publishing income has risen but not quickly enough or sufficiently to compensate for the drops elsewhere. The growth in digital publishing has seen categories of advertising, once the pillars of the newspaper business, migrate online; often to specialist websites. Faced with these twin challenges, publishers have made major changes to the way they operate their businesses to try and maintain profitability. Magazine publishers, radio stations and TV have not been immune to the pressures. Charting the way forward is difficult, especially at a time when the only certainty seeming to be that there will be more change.

Journalists have not been immune to these changes. Convergence means a journalist will often be required to work on more than one platform in the course of a day. The NCTJ has kept pace with the changes. In 2008, the NCTJ led a Journalism Skills Survey, taking account of the views of employers across all sectors of the industry. There was a clear message that the industry valued and needed the traditional skills of story finding and writing, the use of language, accuracy, knowledge of media law and an ability to write shorthand. New skills to deal with digital publishing were also demanded. In 2010 the NCTJ introduced the industry's new entry-level qualification, the Diploma in Journalism. It has five core skills and, at present, six specialist options. Everyone must do all the core subjects and at least two options. The diploma reflects many of the changes seen in the industry in recent years.

The growth of digital publishing is uneven. This is to be expected in an area of rapid growth where new ideas are emerging and different ways are being found to tell stories. The point can be illustrated by these examples:

- *Video was once seen as a major part of a newspaper's website. Fewer videos are being shot, perhaps as a result of fewer staff and the time it takes to put together a package;
 - *Twitter burst on the scene and is now used as a way of publicising content, an addition to a reporter's contacts book and as a newsgathering tool.
 - *The end of SMS (texting) is being predicted as more "smart" phones allow instant messaging.
- Digital publishing means different things to different people. There is no consistency between sectors and within each sector. In fact, variations in the way digital publishing is carried out can be seen between publications in the same ownership.

Put simply, the news business is in flux. It is against this background that the review of the NCE has been undertaken.

History: The NCE owes much to its predecessor, the Proficiency Test. Since the NCE was launched it has continued to evolve. The new-style Logbook has been used by trainees taking the NCE since April 2004 and its success was recognised with a National Training Award in 2007. The old speech exam has become the news report, the mythical Oxdown Gazette ceased publication and the exam has included the reporting of stories for the web for a number of years. The most recent addition was the use of digital media in story gathering and follow-ups in the newspaper practice exam.

Note: The NCTJ runs NCE examinations for reporters, sub-editors, sports journalists and photographers. This review is only concerned with the reporters' exam.

Methodology

Online survey: The information gathering phase of the review began in February with the launch of an online survey to the NCTJ's "constituency". Newspaper editors were encouraged to give their views on the current state of the examination.

We were seeking to:

- * Discover how highly the industry rates the NCE;
- * Make a judgement on the four current components; and
- * Gain a view on the skills to be tested in the NCE.

A total of 104 people completed the survey.

Candidates who took the NCE in March were invited to complete a separate online survey. Seventeen responded.

Focus groups: The survey was followed by focus groups for editors. They were held in Newport, Edinburgh, Leeds and London. Recent NCE candidates took part in a group at Southampton and NCE trainers met in London. Twenty-four people took part.

Interviews: Twelve interviews were conducted with editors and senior managers from the sector's leading publishers. In addition a number of people sent separate comments for consideration.

*Members of the NCTJ's Broadcast Journalism Working Group discussed the NCE at a meeting in April. Members are in the process of developing a broadcast journalism programme of study and assessment methods at diploma (entry) level. Members felt any move to broaden the scope of the NCE to include TV and radio journalists, would need to be considered at executive level within the TV and radio industries.

*Magazines – At diploma level a small number of centres offer NCTJ-accredited magazine journalism courses. Traditionally, magazine journalists do not take the NCE. There was insufficient interest for a planned focus group for magazine editors to go ahead.

Background statistics

Figure 1 There were 104 replies to the online survey. We asked:

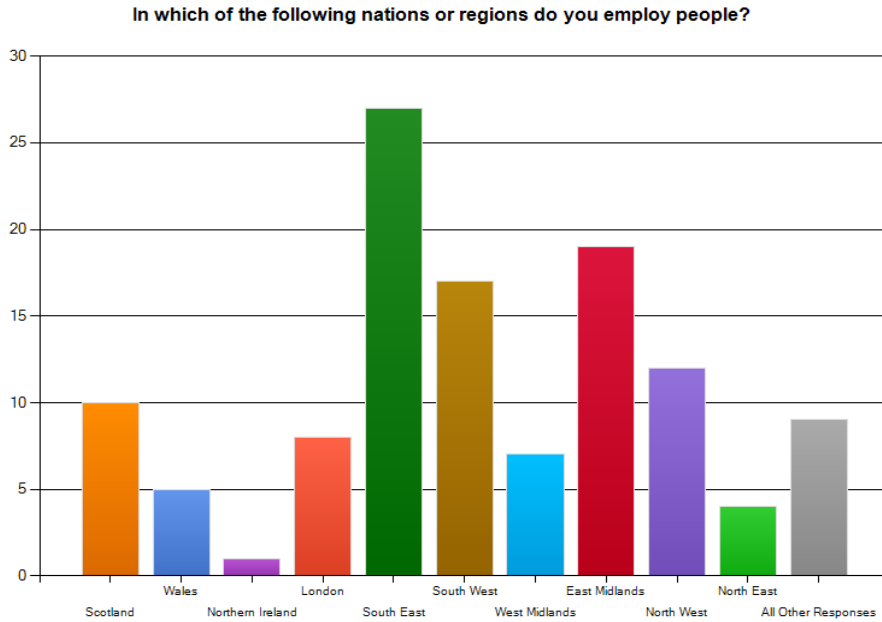


Figure 2 The majority of respondents (69 per cent) to the survey employ fewer than 30 people. We asked:

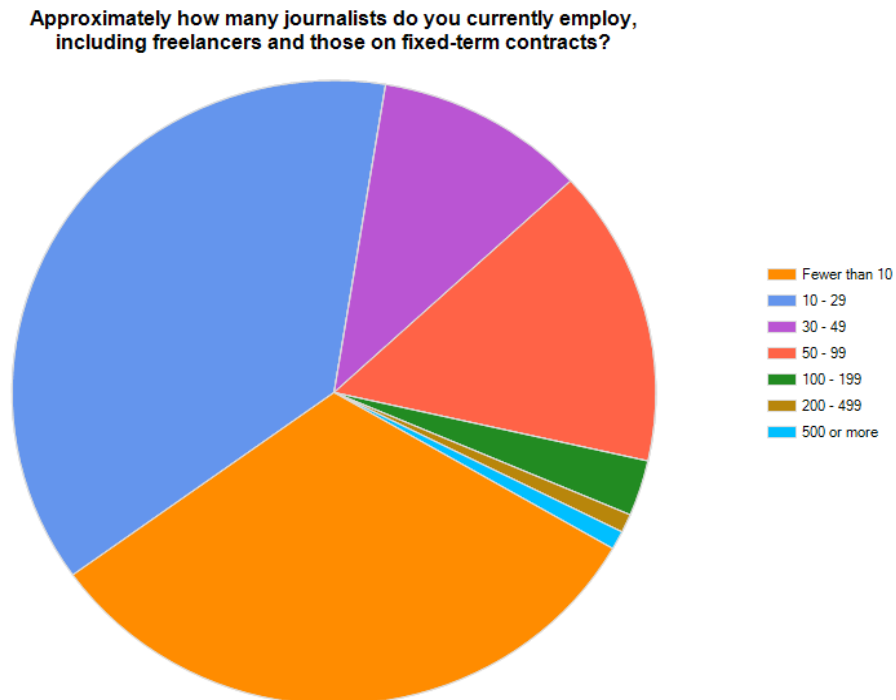


Figure 3

Actual candidate numbers:

2005: 514 candidates

2006: 561 candidates

2007: 454 candidates

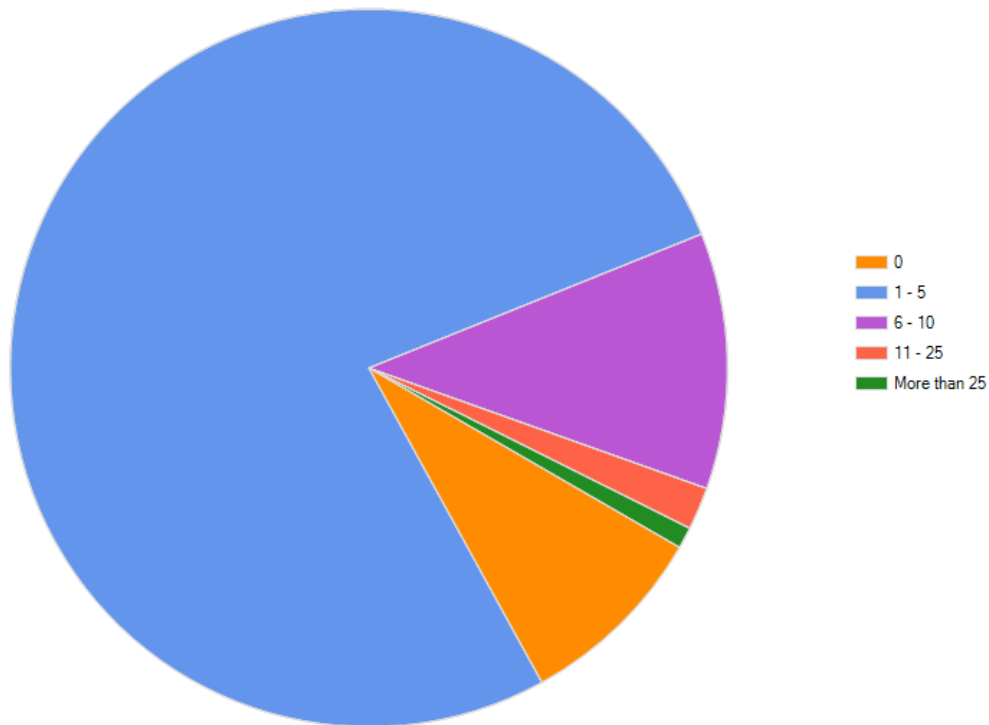
2008: 474 candidates

2009: 640 candidates

2010: 389 candidates; a decline reflecting the downturn in recruitment in the industry.

We asked:

Approximately how many of your trainee journalists took the NCE in the last two years (2009, 2010)?



Responses from candidates

The online survey of candidates who sat the NCE in March, 2011, attracted 17 responses comprising:

Four in each of the following regions:

London,
the South East,
the South West,

Two from
the East Midlands,

And one each from:

Scotland,
the West Midlands,
Yorkshire and the Humber.

4 The value of the NCE

The online survey, focus groups and interviews came back with a similar message: the NCE is highly regarded and valued by the industry. Two phrases recurred: “It’s the benchmark” or “it’s the gold standard”. Another delegate said: “It has worked and it continues to work.” Others spoke of it as being the “currency” of the industry, a standard that everyone understands, a “barometer” of ability, a verified standard and a qualification valued by trainees. “Standards would be lower without the NCE,” said another respondent.

The NCE helps to shape a new recruit’s training over the first 18 months of work. One respondent summed it up like this: “Every newsroom in the land would like to think they give newcomers a sound introduction to the world of journalism through mentoring, copy clinics, buddying and feedback. However, the reality, due to increased workloads and pressures, can often be very different. The NCE, as well as providing a benchmark of quality, also puts in place a framework to ensure that during the first 18 months to two years of their careers (arguably the most important time) they are monitored and developed.”

The value of the NCE has risen in the last two years as job vacancies have become fewer. Editors are now able to shortlist and recruit candidates who have passed the exam. Applications from those who have not passed or not taken the exam are being put to one side by many editors. Reference to the NCE is frequently part of a job specification. “The NCE remains the industry standard for recruiting senior journalists. Experience is always useful but we have no other way of measuring a journalist’s credentials for the job,” said an online survey respondent. Others responding to the survey indicated that the possession of the NCE was not necessarily a “deal breaker”. For example, to some, the NCE was not considered vital when recruiting specialist reporters, when an applicant already has seniority in the industry or has a personal recommendation from a trusted source. A note of caution was sounded by one employer who said it is possible to “coach” poor candidates to pass the exam . . . “therefore you cannot trust the result”.

Information from recent candidates and reports received from editors indicate the exam is well regarded by those newly qualified and those seeking to pass the exam. However, some reporters pointed to the “exam conditions” of the NCE saying it did not reflect their day-to-day work. The point was made by some candidates and editors that “exam nerves” could lead to good journalists failing the NCE. One candidate at the March exam wrote: “The Logbook is a fairer way of assessing a reporter’s competence as it is based on a sustained and varied work load over a long period and not on a highly pressured day under exam conditions. A perfectly good reporter may struggle to become a senior simply because they get nervous in exams.” Another candidate wrote: “The test is old-fashioned and leaves good journalists at risk of slipping up.”

The NCE is still used as a link to pay with one editor pointing out how it provided a salary structure and helped when looking ahead and preparing budget forecasts. The link with pay was also mentioned at the focus group for newly-qualified seniors.

At another focus group, one delegate commented that where a company’s commitment to training was low, the value it placed on the NCE was also likely to be low. Others referred to perceived “exam techniques” and a “formula for doing the interview”.

A number of delegates at focus groups believed the NCTJ should attempt to raise the profile of the qualification. They believe it is an important exam and more should be done by the NCTJ to promote and market the qualification, thereby raising the standing of qualified journalists, both within and outside the industry. One delegate said there was a need to promote the value to the managing directors of newspaper companies.

From the online survey

Figure 4 The NCE has a number of uses and values. Nearly ninety per cent of those taking part in the online survey said they valued it as a national training scheme to an industry standard. Respondents could give more than one answer to this question.

We asked:

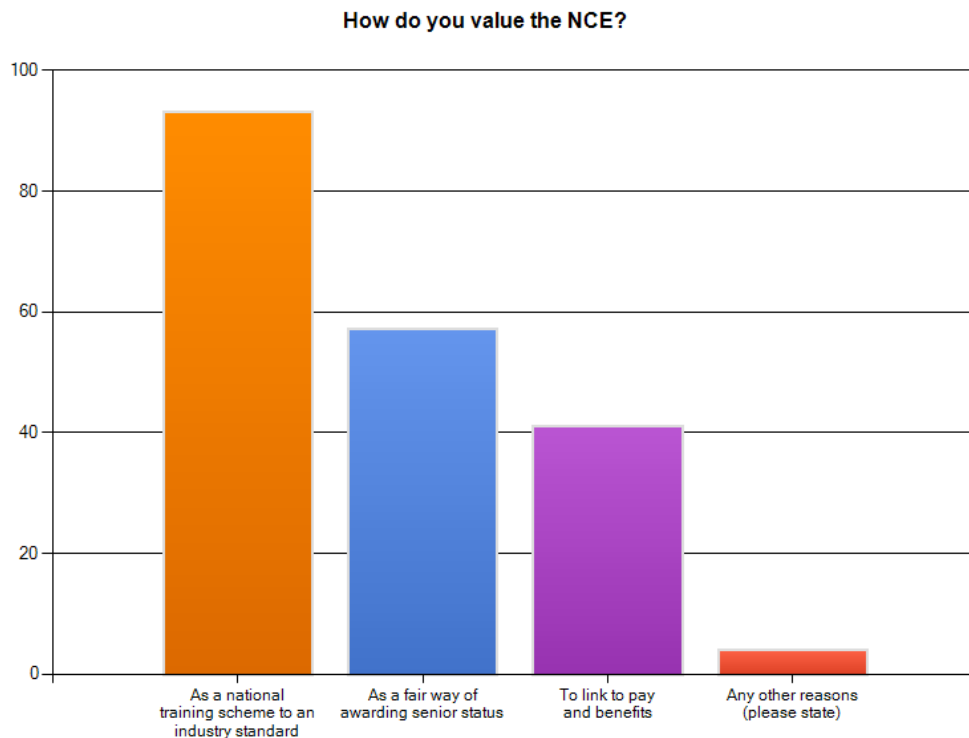
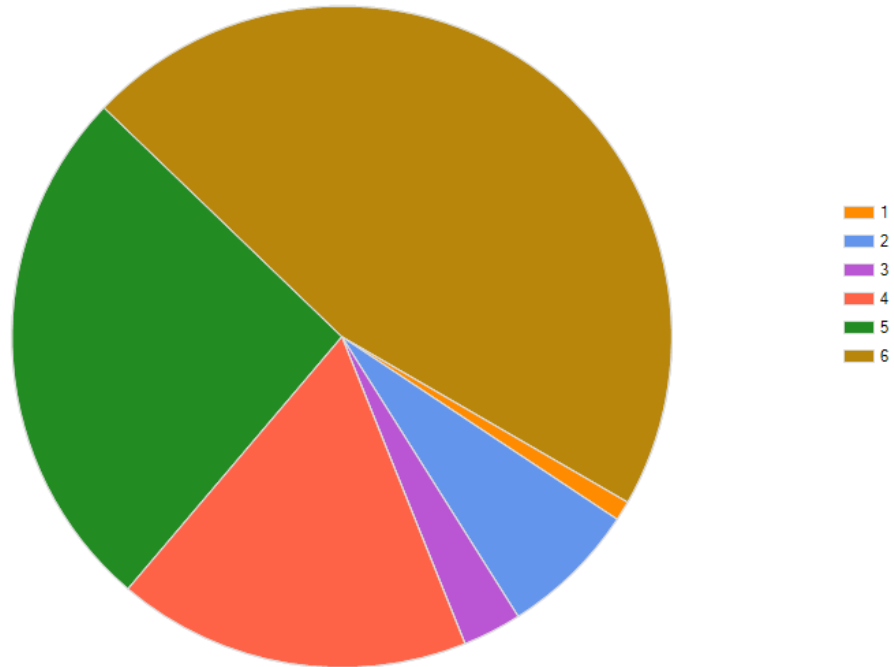


Figure 5 The NCE's use as a recruitment tool is demonstrated by this chart, compiled from those taking part in the online survey. We asked:

When recruiting senior staff, how important to you is it that applicants have passed the NCE? Please rank on a scale of 1 - 6 where 1 is of little or no importance and 6 is of great importance.



Name of the exam

Respondents were asked about the name of the exam (candidates' responses in brackets). Professional Diploma in Journalism was favoured by 58.7 per cent of respondents (23.5%), National Diploma by 26 per cent (29.4 %) and Advanced Diploma by 10.6 per cent (35.3%).

5 The NCE

General

Editors were clear the NCE should continue to test the fundamentals of journalism: the ability to identify a story and then to tell that story in a compelling and accurate way. They demand accuracy. Here are some of the comments from those responding to the online survey which gives a flavour of the general mood:

“At the end of the day we need reporters who can interact with the public, find stories and then write them up quickly. If they can also write a good headline, then that is terrific. Finding the story and building contacts and a rapport with the public is definitely the most vital element. They also need to have a good grasp of the law and the regulations so that we don’t have to worry what they are up to all the time. If they can take pictures and put copy online that is great but definitely an added extra. As far as the rest of it is concerned, we can teach them that in-house if we have to.”

“I think the exam is still about fundamental journalistic standards - it is not a test of Facebook and Twitter skills or, for that matter, audio and video. They have their place but they are not as important as the underlying principles of accuracy, objectivity, balance and news sense. The NCE should be about testing those.”

“The importance of new media skills is going to become higher very quickly. However, without the solid grounding of journalism, good news writing, accuracy and sound interviewing skills to support the technical ability to write for blogs/web/social networking sites, the quality of that journalism will suffer and will become indistinguishable from citizen journalism. It is vital we maintain the standards of the NCTJ/NCE training in all our output - whatever media form that is in.”

“The NCE should be as broad-based as possible, concentrating on the fundamentals that apply whatever media you are working in or using. Many papers no longer have time for video work, or anything which is repackaging news material. The priority should be on getting stories and information that people need, rather than how they are then used.”

“An ability to spot a story, conduct a strong interview and then produce clean, legally sound, well-structured copy remains the priority - with these key skills everything else (social media, video etc) will follow.”

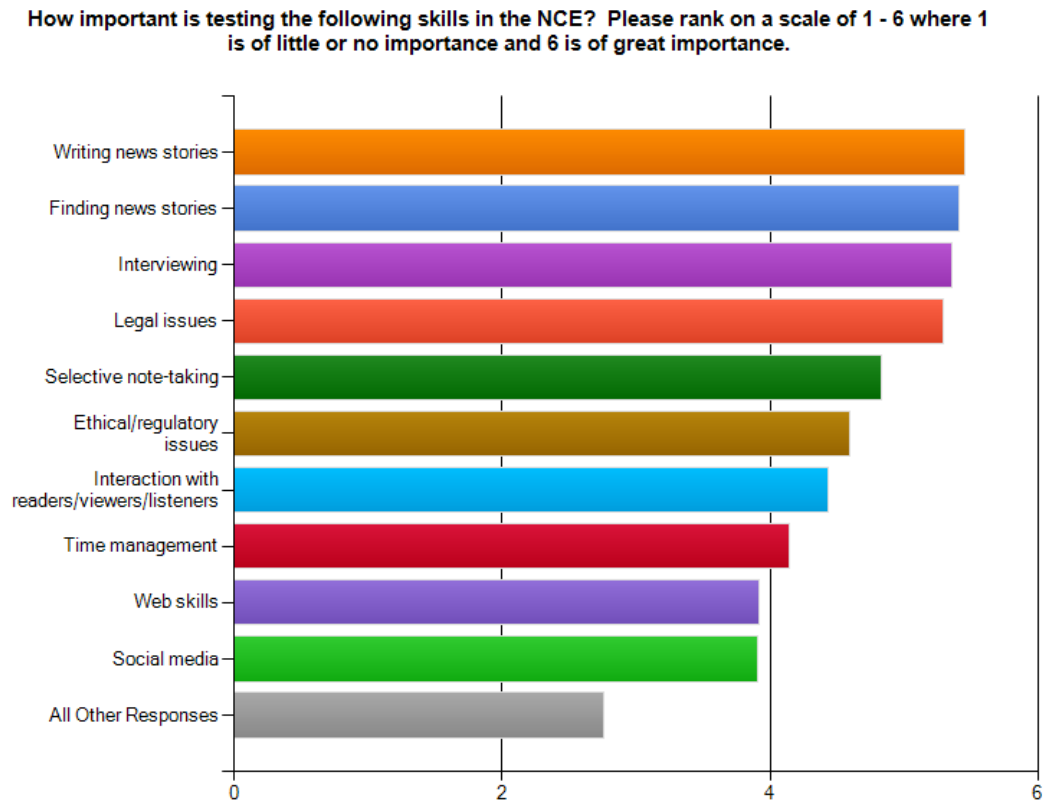
“The NCE should solely concentrate on producing efficient reporters with excellent writing, interviewing and legal skills.”

Some respondents thought, incorrectly, that the NCE still only required stories for print and suggested candidates be required to produce stories for web (as well as print); although there were examples of newspapers where reporters do not work on the associated website.

The way a story reads was seen as vital. One respondent said at the moment candidates who cannot write to an adequate standard were passing the NCE. There should be more emphasis on how a story reads. “This is the most important function of journalism and that will always be the case”, the respondent said.

From the online survey

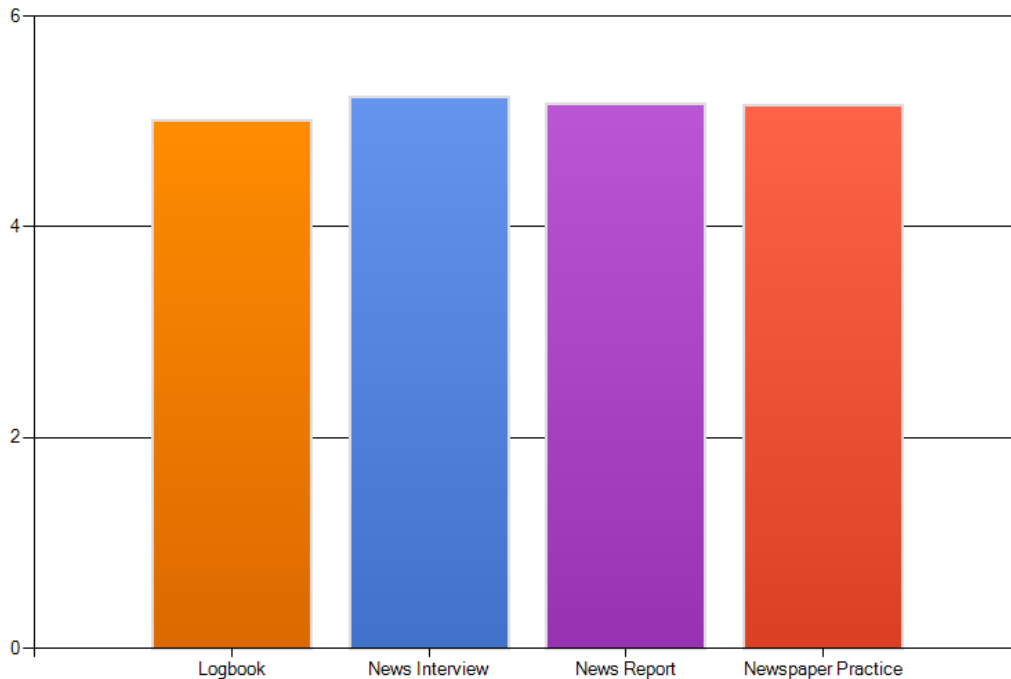
Figure 6 Traditional skills scored highly when, as part of the online survey, we asked editors to assess the importance of skills to be tested in the NCE:



From a maximum score of six, writing news stories achieved 5.46, finding news stories 5.41, interviewing 5.36, legal issues 5.30.

Figure 7 The online survey asked respondents to consider how important they regarded each segment of the exam

The NCE currently has four components: Logbook, News Interview, News Report and Newspaper Practice. Please indicate how important you consider each element of the NCE, on a scale of 1 - 6 where 1 is of little or no importance and 6 is of great importance.



The average rating, maximum score 6, for Logbook was 5.00, News Interview 5.23, News Report 5.16 and Newspaper Practice 5.14

Logbook

The Logbook is the “newcomer” to the NCE. It has a high approval rating; as do all current sections of the NCE.

One delegate at a focus group described the Logbook as a “marvellous introduction”. Another said “absolutely excellent”, a third said it was the “most relevant” and a fourth commented: “I believe that the Logbook is the best way to judge a reporter’s ability/progress over a period of time.”

More than one person pointed out the Logbook empowered trainees to seek appraisals and more training and development. It brought them together with their editors and those responsible for training.

Respondents understood the need for verification and to ensure a candidate’s original work was judged by markers. However, at a number of meetings there were concerns over what was seen as bureaucratic overload for editors/trainers. One comment summed up the views of many: “The Logbook serves a good purpose but the current process is convoluted.”

Some of the current sections were seen as “outdated”, while others are proving difficult for candidates to fulfil. This is particularly true of reporters working on small, rural weeklies. Courts and tribunals have moved away from the countryside locations to be concentrated in the large towns and cities. The Logbook asks for two examples to fulfil a category and in some cases reporters have to make long round trips to cover, for example, a crown court. The value of these cases to the news organisation can be variable. It was also pointed out that covering a couple of crown court cases does not necessarily make you proficient. Press conferences in many areas are few and far between. Other sections were seen by some as outdated or not sufficiently in-tune with current newsrooms. Some are regarded as “simplistic” and cover topics that should easily be covered by a journalist about to sit the NCE. Bigger newspapers, where there are no problems in finding stories to complete the Logbook categories, question the value of this part of the test. They cover so many stories that the Logbook can be a bit of a formality.

The need for newspapers to find and initiate compelling and original stories was made more than once during this review, with one respondent suggesting the Logbook should give this area of work more emphasis.

One topic of discussion around the Logbook was the tendency for candidates to complete the work in the last few weeks before sitting the NCE. Editors spoke of a “mad rush” and others, who help at in-company refresher courses, said they saw incomplete Logbooks at that late stage.

There is, perhaps, a lack of clarity about the Logbook from all sides. Naturally, a candidate will only wish to include their best work in the Logbook. This leads to the Logbook being completed at a late stage, putting pressure on the candidate to find original copy and cuttings (if they have not assiduously kept them on a week-by-week basis) and pressure on an editor/trainer to sign-off the Logbook. Editors and trainers move on and the current incumbent may not be in a position to verify a candidate’s work.

The Logbook is clearly used as a device to bring trainees and their editors/trainers together to review progress. It helps keep everyone’s eye on the ball and in many offices is used as a check on development, an opportunity to give feedback and as a copy clinic. One delegate described it as empowering trainees to seek training and mentoring. However, the Logbook is not set out in that format. One editor suggested: I would like the sections to reflect the progress expected over the 18 months, eg: what reporters would be covering and achieving every three months.” More than once the idea of an interim check on Logbooks was made. The concept of the Logbook is good, said one respondent, but the “policing” needs looking at.

A small number of concerns were raised about journalism standards with one delegate calling for higher pass marks and more exacting standards.

Newspaper Practice

The law questions from the first part of the exam are considered vital. Any suggestion of dropping law from the exam would bring howls of protest. It seems knowledge of media law has never been so important. Respondents strongly supported the current style of exam questions – putting forward a scenario and asking candidates to explain how the story would be

tackled/published. One respondent put it like this: “We need reporters who can interpret the law.” Another editor made the point that candidates should be asked questions where they need to explain what can be published as well as what cannot be published. He said, at present, it all seemed very negative. Consideration should be given to exploring issues around FOI and other Acts of Parliament which helped get stories published.

The general feeling was the law questions should concentrate on the key issues; defamation, contempt, children in court, sexual offences and reporting restrictions. It was also important, said one delegate, that questions were pitched correctly, ie: ones that reporters would be called upon to deal with in their work rather than ones editors would face. Some called for the law questions to be tougher and to make at least one of them compulsory.

At a number of meetings and in interviews, the role of the Press Complaints Commission was discussed. It was felt ethical questions, based on the Editors’ Code of Practice, should form part of the “law” questions in the Newspaper Practice paper.

The second part of the Newspaper Practice exam puts some “what if” scenarios to candidates who are asked to explain how they would tackle the story. To some this was seen as “out-dated” and something of a “make weight”. Others took a totally different view saying ideas were the lifeblood of the news business and reporters needed to think in original ways to exploit stories. At one focus group there was discussion as to whether this could be made part of the Logbook. Candidates would need to demonstrate how they found the story and developed it – whether through “crowd sourcing”, FOI or traditional “patch” work.

Feedback from editors and trainers is that candidates often spend a long time on their law questions and then rush the second part of the exam. Answers, editors thought, could be “waffly”.

News Interview

This section of the exam exercised the minds at all the focus groups and was raised in the interviews. The first concern is that it is an unreal situation. More than one delegate described it as being like a driving test – “you never drive like that again”.

Opinions varied on the interview as a test but a key consideration came to light as the process developed: the need to ensure consistency and fairness for all candidates in all exam centres. The interview paper involves candidates receiving written information and then being able to interview one person for up to 20 minutes to get the story. This role play - “piece of theatre” - has an inherent weakness. It is difficult, if not impossible, to ensure interviewees react in the same way when asked a question. One respondent referred to the “luck of the draw”. Some editors reported instances of seeing interviewees slowly reading from the script while others had witnessed a more “cavalier” approach with one interviewee even giving his own name, instead of the one supplied in the script. It is obvious - but worth repeating - that an interviewee will be more fluent with their final candidate of the afternoon than with the one who came in first. Some editors reported instances of candidates “freezing”, getting “stage fright” and, in one example, of a candidate who could not go on with the interview. However, another editor with experience of helping at in-company refresher courses said most trainees managed to get “into the zone”.

The current system of having an assessor in the room should ensure no candidate is disadvantaged if an interviewee deviates from the script; as long as any differences are noted at the time and recorded on the candidate's script. The focus group for recently qualified reporters was able to shed light on the interview from candidates' perspectives. It helped that some of the delegates had taken this paper more than once. One said their first interviewee read diligently from the script but in the re-take the interviewee sat back and answered questions without much reference to the script. The candidate found this second approach unnerving, believing "the information must be wrong". However, it is quite likely the interviewee knew the script and was trying to be more realistic.

While most editors suggested that interviewing was a core skill, one put forward the idea that the present format was too unrealistic to be useful and "scared" candidates. He suggested a press conference format where the candidates would be marked not only on their stories but on the contribution they made to the questioning process.

Telephones: The NCE has no element of telephone interviewing – a skill reporters use for much of the time. Up to 80 per cent of interviews are said to be conducted by telephone.

Overload: The danger of information overload was raised with it being pointed out the current scripts are packed with detail.

Timing: Although this is clearly a major story, some respondents and delegates felt the amount of time available for writing the story was too long.

There is also a view that marks should be given for a candidate's interview technique.

However, it should be noted that while concerns about the current format need addressing, editors believe that interviewing is a key skill and should be tested at NCE level.

News Report

Many respondents see this paper as a good reflection of a reporter's work – taking information from a written source (hand-out or email) and then adding to it from a "live" source. "This is what we do," said one. The big criticism of the paper is that it is often seen by candidates as a test of shorthand. The plea by trainers of "take a selective note" seems to fall on deaf ears in many cases as candidates strive to take down every word of the speech. Candidates generally see it as a "test of shorthand". Its strength, from an editor's perspective, is that this tests a candidate's ability to correctly and accurately report the spoken word. In a real world working situation reporters can often make a telephone call to "check a quote" or a fact. However, more than once, when this suggestion has arisen, it has been pointed out that you cannot ring the judge and ask him to repeat his summing up or what he said when sentencing. Here is a taste of what the review discovered about the News Report:

"News report is a good test of shorthand and also the ability to evaluate information"

"This is all we have to show that a reporter has the ability to understand a press release and/or speech at an event; spot the news angle and turn it into decent copy. It has to be done somehow and personally I think this is now maybe a bit too easy . . . better would be a mock

council meeting or the like in which the candidates have to read a document, understand what is being said and take an accurate shorthand note in order to produce a relevant news story.”

There is a tight word count for this paper – 300 words. Is there too much information for such a report? Some saw it as a “big ask” while others said it as a good test of tight, crisp writing.

Candidates, who had taken the News Report more than once, had detected what they believed were exam papers with varying degrees of difficulty. One delegate said some papers contained many figures while others a few. It was suggested there should be a “fixed number” of figures for this exam.

More than one delegate/respondent saw similarities between what was being tested in the News Report and the News Interview. The idea of having “one big story” on NCE day, testing the varying elements, was suggested more than once.

One suggestion was that it could work like this:

The information should be gathered by using all of the techniques currently employed in the two different exam papers (eg: digesting information from press releases, library files, internet/social media pages, a quote given as part of a speech and an interview.

Get the trainees to write two stories - a breaking news version [a five-word headline and five pars] for the website (to demonstrate their ability to accurately cover a major story in a tightly-written summary) and a longer version as now for print.

They should also be asked to include details of how they would further develop the story in the days ahead for both print and online.

6 Conclusions

The NCE owes much to its predecessor, the Proficiency Test, which dates back to the 1950s. It has stood the test of time, is held in high regard and reflects the demands of the industry. However, it is important that the exam continues to develop to ensure it is in-tune with today's newsrooms.

A general feeling emerged that the NCE must continue to “move with the times” and reflect what is happening in modern newsrooms. The review did not, however, find demand for radical changes.

A constant refrain was the NCE should be a test of core skills . . . concentrate on the key skills a reporter needs. At a time when the “pressure is on”, the need for the fundamental core skills has never been greater.

Newsrooms are under cost and time pressures and major changes are still under way. It is hard to disagree with the assessment of one delegate who said wholesale changes to the NCE would neither be welcomed by editors or employers.

What is required is for the exam to evolve.

There is no demand for a revolution.

We must continue to test the core skills

What we have works and is trusted.

A key industry-issue is the need for reporters to find and tell more original stories

7 Appendix

The NCTJ records its gratitude for those who took part in this research.

At the outset of the review a small group of editors took part in a trial which helped shape the final survey.

More than 100 editors and senior staff completed the online survey, many adding valuable comments.

The focus groups in Newport, Edinburgh, Leeds, Southampton and London gave great insights to current thinking. They were backed by interviews with editors and senior journalists responsible for training.

All the time, effort and thought from those taking part in the review is greatly appreciated.

* Paul Watson has spent his whole working life as a journalist. He is a former editor of newspapers in East Anglia and Sussex. In 2008 he managed the Journalism Skills Survey for the NCTJ. He is the NCTJ's editorial consultant.

Paul continues to work as a journalist.