THE SCIENCE JOURNALISM INITIATIVE

REPORT TO UNESCO ON PROGRESS REGARDING THE SCIENCE JOURNALISM CURRICULUM

Collecting pre-paid water in Koës ***(Photo: Echoes News Service)***

PREAMBLE

A Proposal on the development of a science journalism curriculum was devised by three Heads of Journalism Departments at Tshwane University in Pretoria, South Africa, Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda and the Polytechnic of Namibia in Windhoek, Namibia, respectively. The Proposal was submitted to the American Embassy in Pretoria, South Africa by the end of 2008, and its main focus was a request to grant the three African academics the opportunity to acquire first-hand information about approaches to adopt when educating journalists and scientists in the art of reporting science and interpreting scientific material or findings. One of the main reasons for submitting such a project proposal was that it would serve to assist three top African Journalism Schools in gathering material which would inform a post-graduate curriculum in Science, Health and Environmental Reporting (SHEAR). The Proposal was approved and it provided the three academics to visit academic institutions and media houses in New York, Denver and Boulder in Colorado and Tampa/St. Petersburg in Florida, from 14 to 24 April 2009.

In 2007 the aforesaid academic departments were identified in a UNESCO-commissioned Study (2007) as potential journalism Centres of Excellence. What the three academic departments have in common is, among others, a consultative approach to curriculum development.

It is envisaged that the Science Journalism curriculum would be offered as a post-graduate qualification of approximately one year, and which would ideally develop into a Master's Degree in Journalism, incorporating science-related specialisations. In a world of climate change, health issues and carbon emissions, specialised knowledge and reporting skills of journalists become even more important in order to reach and educate the masses. Likewise, scientists are keen to share their research with a variety of audiences and this could be done more effectively with training in Science Journalism.

The ultimate goal of this programme is to establish a Chair in Science Journalism for Africa. Such a Chair would operate - as a partnership – on a rotational basis - for about three years (or less) in one country before moving on to another African country, in order to be truly representative of the continent. All the American role-players consulted were very interested in this idea because of the exchange and networking opportunities this project holds.

THE PROPOSED CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK

Background

Against the background of the impact of modern technologies and globalisation on the sustainability of the world's resources and its environment, it is imperative for journalists to successfully communicate relevant messages on science, health and environmental issues to a society in a rapidly developing Africa. This would be possible through devising a specialised journalism curriculum that would convey applied knowledge through sound content and professional pedagogical approaches. It targets candidates with a prior tertiary qualification, preferably in the journalism or communication field. However, the study-abroad period has shown that holders of Degrees in History, Geology or Science had excelled in post-graduate studies focusing on Science Journalism.

Curriculum Focus

This qualification is based on Science Journalism, and explores the limits and challenges of the transfer of scientific knowledge. As such it will adopt a journalistic approach to science,

incorporating health and environmental reporting. It will focus on science in its human context, relating science to society in general. A need exists for Journalists to popularise science in order to capture the audience's interest. This programme is devised from the perspective of the journalist. Therefore, communication skills must be at a level that allows for the interpretation, criticism and analysis of the work of scientists or results of studies requiring of students to produce work that is indicative of their ability to communicate successfully and accurately. In addition to this, partnerships between academe and industry are of the utmost importance since it would provide opportunities for internships.

The SHEAR programme is about effective journalistic communication, research and adopting an analytical approach towards the work of scientists. Successful science reporting is not only about finding exciting topics, but also about topical scientific issues that would be addressed through appropriate research and debate.

Wide consultation was undertaken during a two-year exercise for the submission of this programme and continues with role players in schools of journalism and industry. In the process the UNESCO publication “Model Curricula for Journalism Education” was followed as a foundation to compile the curriculum. The following guideline/requirement is, therefore, important: “A post-graduate program for students with a Bachelor’s Degree In Journalism or a Bachelor’s Degree in another field and at least five years of Journalism experience.”

Duration of the Programme

The duration of the programme will be one year (full-time) or the equivalent of 1200 notional hours, which would culminate in 120 credits (10 notional hours = 1 credit), and will be a post-graduate qualification.

Credits

The credit value of individual courses was based on 120 credits being equal to 1200 notional hours (traditionally a one-year programme), and as implemented in South Africa and Namibia. It is envisaged that the ratio of Journalistic content as opposed to Arts/Science would be 40% Journalism and 60% Arts/science.

Subjects to be included in the SHEAR Curriculum

SUBJECTS	CREDIT HOURS
History of Science and Development	5
Science and the Human Context	7
Science and the Mass Media	7
Journalism Principles and Techniques	5
Science Writing I	12
Reporting the Environment	7
Gender and Health Reporting	7
Science Writing II	12
Statistics for Science Journalism (block)	7
Advanced Research Methods	7
Research project/Mini Thesis/Series of productions for any medium	30
Internship – a block period of one week	14
SUB-TOTAL CREDIT HOURS	**120**

N.B. Select TWO electives, one for semester 1 and another for semester 2

ELECTIVES	NO. OF CREDITS
Science and Images	7
Traditional Medicines and Health	7
Science Policy and Implementation	7
SUB-TOTAL ELECTIVES	14
TOTAL CREDITS	**134**

Local Consultation (African): Journalism Educators

It is intended to submit the draft Science Journalism curriculum to the various journalism educators, especially those who find themselves in UNESCO Journalism Centres of Excellence and Reference. There is agreement that the more consultative the approach to curriculum development, the greater the appeal of the Programme. Of importance in the syllabi would be the prescribed and recommended texts. It is hoped that reading lists would be representative of Africa and scholars in Africa.

CONCLUSION

Having spent a day in Pretoria in June 2010 meant that at least a 10-hour day was needed to get to the stage we're at right now. If we cannot meet again, we would have to adhere to a stringent timeline of activities to complete assessment activities for the various syllabi, as well as reading lists. Needless to say, the one-day meeting in Pretoria, funded by UNESCO, served to allow especially for an understanding of the format to be adopted and the subjects to be included. It further served to allow for discussions relating to nomenclature, which is of the utmost importance in any curriculum.

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