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# THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS IN THE EDUCATION OF PROPERTY AND CONSTRUCTION PROFESSIONALS IN AUSTRALIA

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This paper is concerned with the role that professional institutes should play in the educational development of young entrants. Although most professions have abrogated responsibility for education to universities, this paper argues that professional education has always been one of the key responsibilities of professions. The research focuses on two separate aspects of the issue, firstly the perceived role of professional institutes in society and secondly, the changing attitude of students to their own educational experience.

The views of industry leaders were contrasted with the views of university students undertaking undergraduate courses in property and construction. Students believe that the attainment of a degree alone will not differentiate them in the job market. The results show that students now take a minimalist attitude to education and do not seem to make the most of their university experience. Instead they want access to professional work related skills and see this as being more important.

The paper argues that students need to achieve broad and liberal education which is recognised as important for entry into built-environment professions. In addition the paper suggests that professional work experience should be included in undergraduate courses in a more formalised manner.

**Keywords:** University education, professions, institutes, work experience

## INTRODUCTION

The role of education has changed significantly, and so too the role of professional institutes. The role of professional associations is often confused by its members and the society as a whole. Many are unclear about their role today; is it to provide leadership, be advocates for members, or promote professional standards? This first aim of this paper is to establish the attitude of the property and construction professions to tertiary education. This was then contrasted with the attitudes of students currently undertaking a university degree courses in the field.

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The changing attitudes of students towards their own education are having an impact on the ability of universities to offer broad educational experiences. Past research (Mills and Ashford 2004) has shown that students now adopt a minimalist attitude to tertiary education because they have become aware that a degree alone will not guarantee entry to a profession. The view appears to be that the value of an undergraduate education is less than it once was. Research has shown that students are spending larger amounts of time undertaking part-time work. The second aim of the paper is to establish the reasons for amount of paid work undertaken by students as well as the type of work in which they are involved.

Also, in order to improve cost efficiencies universities have merged courses creating generic courses that in many cases reduce the emphasis on technical and professional skills. This leads to undesirable outcomes for professions including loss of professional skills.

Next the paper adopts a definition of a profession. Then the paper discusses the university view of paid outside work. The paper then goes on to describe the methodology using a structured interview and survey approach. The results are discussed at length and some conclusions are drawn.

## WHAT IS A PROFESSION?

A satisfactory definition of a profession has proved to be very elusive; however history has shown that professions are a type of occupation that has particular characteristics. Eccles, (2002) cites Millerson who defines a profession as "a type of higher grade non-manual occupation with both subjectively and objectively recognised status, possessing a well defined area of study or concern and providing a definite service after advanced education and training".

Firstly, according to Eccles (2002) it is generally accepted that there are four methods of attempting to define and describe the concept of a profession: by trait; by process; by usage; and as a labour market phenomenon. The best and most obvious means is by universal definition achieved by describing a set of characteristics that delineate a profession. Criteria such as possession of a body of knowledge, a code of ethics and (self-) regulation are typically included within such a definition, but the extent to which it is possible to develop such universally applicable ideals has become regarded as increasingly problematic.

Secondly, Eccles (2002) believes that a more appropriate approach has been to investigate the process, or history, of “professionalisation” assuming that the desire to become a professional is more important than conforming to a simple series of characteristics. Thirdly, the concept of professionalism can be regarded as one of self-definition and the usage of the term by the parties themselves in a context becomes the centre of investigation. The last school of thought sees the professions as a phenomenon of the labour market, a simple labour aristocracy or group of workers provided with an advantage by some twist of fate or quirk of capitalist economics.

More recently, the issue of professionalism was confronted by the Institution of Engineers, Australia in the late 1990s, and the following key features were identified (IEAust 1996).

The engineering profession has:

1. Social contract between its members and the community
2. Special deep knowledge based on scientific and historical principles

3. Distinctly identified as a group
4. Application of knowledge and balanced decision-making in the context of the social contract
5. Code of ethics
6. Disciplinary procedures and the maintenance of standards
7. Competence including continuing professional development

Professions are still highly dependant on people who can act independently while mindful of the broader issues facing society. These individuals have generally been drawn from university graduates who have spent time understanding and questioning the fundamental tenets upon which society is based. In addition, it is important that graduates have an understating of the basic concepts and technical skills necessary to undertake professional work.
The next section of this paper focuses on the changes within the university sector, including the attitude of students to their own educational experiences.

## A UNIVERSITY PERSPECTIVE

The role of university education has changed significantly in the last decade. Over the last two decades fewer younger people leave school and directly enter the trades or professions. This is partly the result of young people staying in education longer, which tertiary education now extends into their mid-20s. From an educational perspective, there is some debate as to whether the quality of education should be judged according to the breadth of the problems that education poses for students (Lomas 1997) or by the market model, in which excellence is displayed when the product (the graduate) sells well (McMurtry 1991).

If the education quality perspective is taken, then it is possible that the depth of education will suffer where student attend lectures but are unable to undertake any further independent research-based study. However, the fact that so many students are employed so extensively in industry-based work indicates that the industry recognizes their "value." (Sweeney and Twomey 1997) suggest that employers seek to recruit individuals who are capable of more than simple response to change, rather they want ''adaptive, adaptable and transformative'' employees who will aid the organisation in the maintenance, development and transformation of the organisations in anticipation of change. They also assert that it is the responsibility of universities to address this need and produce suitable graduates who have a realistic expectation of the workplace (Garavan and Murphy 2001).

McInnis (2003) states that the results of various studies over a number of years shows that undergraduate students are unclear about their obligations to the university, and tend to spend less time on tasks that improve their learning experience. Instead, students are more pragmatic about their study and view learning as a vehicle to obtain work. The emphasis is now focusing on the universities who are beginning to detect that modern students have lower expectations of higher education and consequently there is a lower demand for full educational experiences. This according to McInnis (2003) reduces the student incentives to be engaged in the education process, and instead they are highly job focused.

The role of universities has also changed significantly. Most academics now working in higher education operate within a system which is fundamentally different to the one they themselves experienced as students. The same could also be said for employers who in most cases have not been students for many years (Watts 2002). Higher education is now a business with a profit motive. The tertiary education sector is now Australia's sixth largest export industry generating

$1.5 billion, mainly through overseas students (Rodd 2005). Most universities attract a significantly large proportion of their income from non-government sources and in addition are highly focused on reducing delivery costs. This has led to the amalgamations and mergers of courses in order to improve education cost efficiencies. Universities have been under intense financial pressure to improve teaching efficiencies and broaden income streams, mainly through recruiting overseas students.

Tertiary course are now much more generic than in the past, with a reduced emphasis on the development of technical and professional skills. The challenge for professions is how to change to accommodate this new reality. In addition, because of the larger number of students entering university access to a degree is far less valuable than it was in the past. Students are taking a far more pragmatic approach to their learning experience, because obtaining degree alone is unlikely to differentiate them in the workplace.

## METHODOLOGY

The research methodology comprised two parts. Firstly, a series of semi-structured interviews of industry leaders was undertaken. The aim of the interviews was to elicit views about the importance of education on the ongoing operation of the professions. The second stage involved the collection of a survey of students concerning their attitudes towards education and professional work.

The first stage of the research follows an investigative approach; which involves the collection of qualitative data. Interviewing is a useful approach to obtain exploratory information, as the respondents can be probed more fully (Fowler 1984). Due to the depth of information required in this research the use of interviews was adopted. This was considered the most appropriate mechanism for eliciting the knowledge of the industry leaders. A group of 4 people was selected for the interviews; all were obtained from personal contacts. The participating organisations were all from property and construction related organisations and therefore are exposed to similar external environments. The persons approached were:

- President, Royal Australian Institute of Architects, Victoria (RAIA)
- President, Australian Property Institute, Victoria (API)
- President, Engineers Australia, Victoria Chapter, (EA)
- The Building Commissioner, Government of Victoria (BC)

All interviewees were given a similar set of open-ended questions designed to investigate the role of professional societies, the questions sought the following responses;

- How does your organisation promote recognition and status of the profession to the community?
- What is your organisations role in maintaining the ongoing credibility of members?
- What does your organisation do to demonstrate the benefits of membership?

The interviews were each approximately 40-50 minutes in duration. Interviews were tape recorded, and transcripts were produced. The transcript of each interview was returned to the interviewee for validation.

The second stage comprised a survey of students engaged in undergraduate courses in the built-environment, including architecture, building, construction management and quantity surveying. In 2003 academic staff from five universities were contacted, each were asked if they would assist by distributing a questionnaire to their students enrolled in the built environment programs. The survey sought information on the amount of time spent in paid employment during semester. In additions, students were asked to respond to questions on a number of other relevant issues including the reasons for seeking work, the type of work undertaken, and the amount of time spent on campus for study purposes.

The survey forms were sent to each course coordinator for distribution to students in class. The completed survey forms were returned anonymously via a stamped address envelope to the University of Melbourne. The data were entered into an Excel spreadsheet, which was later converted in to SPSS for analysis. In addition, each course coordinator was asked to specify the total number of students enrolled in their courses (Table 2). The overall response rate was 45% (536/1186) indicating that the survey represents a sufficiently large sample of built-environment courses in Australia.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The aim of the study was to determine the role of professions in tertiary education. Built environment courses are known to be highly vocational, and students are in very high demand by the industry. However, according to Lomas (1997) courses are becoming more generic with less emphasis on technical and professional skill. In addition, students appear to adopt a minimalist attitude to education and instead focus on their future employment prospects. The survey contained questions that related to the two research objectives, namely;

1. The role of built-environment professions and their institutes
2. Student attitudes to university education,

### The Role of Built-environment Professions

This research sought the views of several leaders in the property and construction industry. It recorded the attitudes of a group of people who are in a strong position to understand the complexity of professional societies. In many respects their attitudes are similar; all support the maintenance of high levels of education, training and continuing professional development. There was a perception that these were all essential characteristics of what has been termed “professionalism” by Eccles (2002). This is based on the notion that the community needs confidence in the integrity of professionals.

The entry into all institutes represented in this paper all require at least a degree level qualification and a number of years of professional work experience. The interviewees all spoke about the need for public recognition and status. This resulted from the perception that professional societies seemed to be dependant on maintaining high levels of educational and professional experience of their members. This was expressed very clearly by the president of the RAIA who stated that “most of all I think the membership has always wanted the Institute to be active in the public sphere, to represent the benefits of architects to the community... that is what the Institute is there to do!”

She went on to suggest that " I believe that we try to say to the public: here is a profession that has high skills, high levels of education, high levels of practical experience, and a profession that has a humanist and broad social knowledge base. So, we are not just technical people; we have a bit of professionalism, and we understand a lot about many things. The best way we can serve the community, and clients, is to be the best that we can be."

Each of the industry leaders concluded that the public status of their profession was important. Public recognition is a significant part of the responsibility of professional societies, at least in the minds of their Presidents. It was summed up by the Engineers Australia President, "I think members see profile raising as an important aspect of what the Institution does for its members…. If the profile can be raised it has a number of positive affects, including more demand for university courses, and our members are in a stronger negotiating position with employers over pay and conditions."

The industry leaders suggested that professionals need to keep up-to-date and relevant to their clients and the community. It was suggested by the Building Commissioner that CPD is "expected to improve the public standing of building occupations". Results of the interviews showed that both undergraduate and continuing education were important components of maintaining community confidence in the professions, and that the institutes should be seen to be actively promoting its benefits.

In addition, the president of the Australian Property Institute mentioned that one of the roles of the institute was to "act on discipline matters more quickly and more vigorously" in the interest of other members and the community. This was seen as necessary to ensure that insurance premiums remain as low as possible, and to give the impression that their members have professional credibility.

The greatest imperative of institutes is their long-term role to ensure that the community receives value in the provision of professional services. What is concluded in this paper is that public status, maintenance of skills, and ethical standards, will remain the main objectives of professional societies. However, it may be reasonable to suggest that in the future institutes will need to be more strategic in their operation and rely less on reactive approaches. In future it is suggested that professional societies will need to discuss their roles more actively with their members and the community than they have in the past; in particular their contribution towards tertiary education.

To date there has been a consensus between academia and industry that a university education is a necessary first entry point for the practice of a profession. A liberal education is a common part of most undergraduate degree programs. It has been traditionally accepted that the selection criteria used by university is sufficient to ensure that the individuals selected possess the desirable attributes and traits necessary for a professional career. It has also been largely accepted that graduates of accredited university courses have met the minimum levels of competency to begin work albeit under guidance of a senior professional in the field.

**Student attitudes to university education**

Students seem to accept a view that education is subordinate to employment, and that university exists as an entry point to professional work. This statement is based on a survey of over 500 students who were enrolled in disciplined-based undergraduate courses in five universities across Australia. The study group were students in built environment courses where the job and salary

prospects were very good. The results showed that students start working on average 15 hours in the first year of their course and this rises to 23 hours in fourth year (which is usually the final year). This represents more time than the students spend on campus (15 hours per week) attending lectures, tutorials and accessing the library.

These findings suggest that when students make sacrifices in relation to university life, sacrifices are most often made in the extent to which independent study is undertaken, rather than in attendance of lectures and tutorials. Indeed, students appear to spend no more time at university than that required for timetabled lectures and tutorials. This is consistent with (Rolfe 2002) Rolfe's (2002) finding that British university students are disengaged from university life and minimize the time they spend on campus. Qualitative comments provided by some of the students at the end of the questionnaire also revealed students' preferences for minimizing the time spent at the university so that they can engage in uninterrupted paid work.

The next section of the paper contrasts the views of the profession with the new reality of undergraduate education. Students do not value the attainment of a degree to the same extent as in the past, and instead attempt to minimise their exposure to learning experiences.

**Motivations for seeking work**

The survey asked students to give their reasons for seeking work. The students were offered a limited list of seven reasons for work. The results of the study (Table 1) indicate the financial gain was not the only reason for working. Instead, students believed that work was mostly undertaken because it benefited their long term career, as well as their undergraduate studies.

Table 1 -Indicate the extent to which the following statements relate your reasons for work (Disagree 1 to Agree 5)

| Reason for work | Mean Score | Rank |
|---|---|---|
| It benefits my long term career | 4.23 | 1 |
| Because it is beneficial to my studies | 4.00 | 2 |
| To pay for my essential living expenses | 3.71 | 3 |
| To provide income for my social activities | 3.56 | 4 |
| To save money for special purposes | 3.11 | 5 |
| I am reluctant to leave my industry job | 2.60 | 6 |
| The rates are better than for casual employment | 2.48 | 7 |

The questions asked about the reasons for work were based on a similar study by Lucas, (1997). The results of this research support the work of Lucas; students work for a variety of reasons but financial imperatives are not always the prime motivator. This result may show that students perceive industry-based work as being of greater educational/career development value than its ability to provide short-term financial reward.

Students considered that the most important reasons they seek industry work is because it benefits their long-term career. It may be reasonable to suggest that the benefits may be due to maintaining industry contacts and developing a stronger resume for future job applications. This occurs despite negative impacts on their educational experience at university. This result is

understandable because students' view education as subordinate to obtaining entry to a professional occupation.

Table 2 shows that the average number and percentage by type of employment. Casual work (i.e. non-industry work) consumes the fewest hours each week (6 hours), while working in the construction industry consumes more time (15 hours). An independent sample T-test was conducted to assess whether there were significant statistical differences between the work types. Students working in industry-based occupations do work significantly more hours per week than those in casual employment at the 5% level. (t=-.4.682, *p*=.000).

In the qualitative comments provided by the students at the end of the questionnaire a common theme was the need for greater flexibility on the part of the University to accommodate the requirements of students in paid work. These comments made reference to timetabling, for example one student wrote "classes could be scheduled earlier in the morning rather than later in the afternoon because after work I feel drained."

Table 2. Number and Percentage of students by Work Type and Year

| | Industry-based Work | Casual Work | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Year 1 | 85(57%) | 64(43%) | 149 (100%) |
| Year 2 | 47(46%) | 55(54%) | 102(100%) |
| Year 3 | 101(55%) | 82(45%) | 183(100%) |
| Year 4 | 75(78%) | 21(22%) | 96(100%) |
| Double Degree | 15(71%) | 6(29%) | 21(100%) |
| Total | 323(59%) | 228(41%) | 551(100%) |

Students have realised that employers are less prepared to employ students who have a limited understanding of the industry. Hence, students in the first two years of the course are unlikely to be very useful to employers in any professional capacity and so seek causal work not related to their careers. However, this situation changes from third year, when students seem to become more active in seeking industry-based jobs.

## CONCLUSIONS

There is a need to accept students working as a "new reality" (McInnis 2003) and recognize that combining part time work with study can provide students with personal and intellectual attributes beyond those traditionally delivered in university degree programmes.

Universities and professional institutes have yet to recognise the value of students' work as part of their educational experience. However, professionals are cognisant of the difficulty of balancing the profit-centred demands of industry with the liberal educational experiences of university. As previously recorded above, the President of the Institution of Engineers stated "If the profile (of the engineering profession) can be raised it has a number of positive affects, including more demand for university courses, and our members are in a stronger negotiating position with employers over pay and conditions." The professions and the universities have an opportunity to more formally integrate industry-based student work into the undergraduate curriculum.

Most young people entering professional occupations have spent at nearly 20 years as full-time students. A degree alone is not sufficient to differentiate most young people apart in the work market. It is not surprising that students seek industry-based work to the extent that they do as this appears to be one of the few ways to obtain industry contacts and gain a measure of work skills that employers consider is important. However, the important educational experiences that are necessary precursor to professional work are becoming lost due to the minimalist attitude adopted by students.

In higher education research there is a growing interest in the importance of work-based learning, which is defined as linking learning to the work role. Garavan and Murphy (2001) suggest that work-based learning requires consensus and agreement from key players in the learning process, namely: the individual student; the employer; and the higher education institution. Work-based learning helps to bridge the gap between theory and practice by permitting reflection on actions and the testing out and re-applying of theories when faced with dilemmas and when confronting new situations in the workplace. The results of this research suggests that some form of work-based learning may provide the necessary link between the students need for work and the necessity for deeper educational experiences as a student.

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