Built Environment Professional Bodies; perspectives on their role in Australia

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Abstract

As professional institutions increasingly seek to be global organisations with local significance, there is a need for them to maintain and grow their membership base. In order to survive and thrive, a new generation of members are needed for professional bodies in the built environment. Wilkinson and Zillante (2007) identified the issues of under recruitment and an ageing membership in the Building Surveying profession in Australia and Elliot & Warren (2005) similarly identified a declining valuation profession. Professional bodies not only need to recruit more student members into the profession during their studies, but they also need to convert these student members to fully qualified members. Warren and Wilkinson’s (2008) survey of 661 Australian student perceptions of built environment professional bodies showed that students value professional qualifications but that there is a lack of understanding of the role of professional bodies.

The employer’s perceptions of Australian graduate employees’ membership of surveying, property and construction professional bodies was examined in a survey of major national and international firms (Wilkinson and Warren 2008). This research sought to identify the importance placed on professional institutions by employers and the measures adopted in terms of encouraging professional body membership in the workplace. This paper presents an analysis of the two surveys of students and employers and seeks to reveal the differing perspectives of the two parties. It identifies the critical issue for professional institutions globally in recruiting new members and expanding the institutions both locally and internationally. The paper suggests ways in which employers and professional institutions can work together to increase student and graduate understanding of the importance of professional institution membership and grow the property and construction professions internationally.

Keywords; Australia, built environmental professional institutions, employers, students, graduates.
1. Introduction

The property and construction industry has relied heavily on its professional bodies to maintain educational and professional standards among its members and to regulate the profession for the benefit of its members and the public. It is widely recognised that professions fulfil an important role in society and much has been published on these benefits over the years. Grimshaw (2001), writing on the facilities management profession, identified a number of underlying characteristics of a profession. He posited the hallmark of a profession to be; ‘specific and have a definable knowledge and skills base that has to be acquired and tested; a high degree of self-control of behaviour via codes of ethics; and a recognised social responsibility that gives a primary and selfless orientation to the community interest.’ (Grimshaw 2001;55).

All professional bodies seek to recruit and retain the ‘best and brightest’ in order to secure future success and continued status amongst their peers (Fedoryshyn & Hintz 2000). For example, within the built environment professional bodies, the mission statement of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors is to; ‘establish RICS as the most respected and highest profile global organisation for professionals involved in land, property and construction.’ (RICS, 2004).

The regulation of ethical standards by professional bodies is recognised as a cornerstone of professional practice and, in many jurisdictions around the world, it is the professional bodies, with their well established codes of ethical practice, that provide a regulatory buffer between the professional in practice and the role of the State in protecting the public. The role of professional codes; ‘is to prevent professionals from exploiting the asymmetrical information that is a part of the professional-client relationship.’(Jamal & Bowie 1995). It is for these reasons that professional bodies have grown in national and international contexts and the import of the quality of membership and the ethical standards which they maintain is essential to their continued success (Grimshaw 2001; Jamal & Bowie 1995).

In Australia there is evidence that some built environment professional bodies are facing difficulties in attracting new entrants (Zillante, 2007). Is this a result of lower numbers of students enrolling into built environment courses? Is it because graduates are joining but failing to become full members of the professional bodies? What are the expectations of the major employers of graduates in terms of qualifications and professional body membership and what is the role of professional bodies in bringing together the employer and graduate within the profession?

The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS), the largest international professional institution in the property and construction industry, established an office in Australia in 2000 with a stated objective of attracting new members and growing its professional influence within the Asia-Pacific region. It was envisaged that young practitioners would be attracted to the global brand, as interest from Universities to accredit courses in both property and construction was strong. One early strategy to attract young members was to offer free student membership. Not surprisingly this
strategy paid off with student membership rising from virtually nil in 1999 to over 3000 by 2007 (RICS 2007). While free student membership grew the level of conversion to full membership has not been strong. The reasons for this lower than expected conversion is not clear. It may be as a result of changing attitudes to professional body membership by both students and employers, or it may be due to the perceptions regarding value for money as has been demonstrated in some other professions.

This paper seeks to illustrate some of the current issues facing built environment professional bodies within Australia from both the employers’ and the students’ perspective. It will explore the common issues and any non alignment of expectations between these two parties as well as comparing two earlier research reports which looked individually at each of the groups and their expectations of the profession.

The declining level of student entry to the profession is a concern for all stakeholders. The tertiary institutions, employers and professional bodies all have a role to play in ensuring the continued growth and the maintenance of standards within Australia. Figure 1 below shows the overall total numbers of students enrolled in tertiary education courses in Australia in 1996, 2001 and 2006. This graph illustrates the overall upwards trends in tertiary education nationally. Students enrolled on built environment courses, including construction, property, architecture, planning, fall into a number of the broader tertiary education categories. It is, therefore, not possible to specifically isolate built environment students from the government statistics. Most built environment students would be counted in the Architecture and Building category, but some will also appear in figures for Management & Commerce or even Engineering and related technologies, Thus when trying to determine the numbers entering built environment tertiary education these statistics must be treat with some degree of caution.

**Figure 1 Total numbers of students enrolled on HE courses in Australia 1996, 2001 & 2006**

![Graph showing total numbers of students enrolled in tertiary education courses in Australia 1996, 2001, & 2006.](image)

Source: adapted from DEST 2006
When the graduate completions data is look at more closely, Figure 2 illustrates the difference in trends for two fields of study, namely; Architecture & Building and Management & Commerce courses in Australia from 1996 to 2006. Student numbers have gone from 31,078 in 1996 to 74,163 in 2006 for Management & Commerce and from 2,906 to 4,643 for Architecture & Building in the same period. Clearly there has been significant growth in student numbers entering management courses while growth in students choosing Built Environment courses has not grown by anything like the same proportions. Whilst Architecture & Building records an increase of 59% in the decade, Management and Commerce increases its total student numbers by 138%.

**Figure 2 Students enrolled in Architecture & Building and Management & Commerce courses in Australia from 1996 to 2006** (Source: adapted from DEST 2006)

Along with many other developed nations Australia has expanded significantly the access to tertiary education over the last decade. The recent OECD (2006) report shows this global upward trend in tertiary education Figure 3.
This increase in tertiary education has been achieved by increasing the numbers of national students studying at tertiary level and also by expanding the numbers of international or overseas students studying in Australia. Whilst total student numbers have increased for Architecture and Building studies between 1996 and 2006, the totals have not kept up with increases in other fields of study and this is a concern for the Built Environment professions. This is especially so when considering the high levels of construction and property activity in the economy during this period. As a consequence, we are facing a skills shortage across the built environment which most employers are all too aware of (Property Australia, 2007). Furthermore, the most current figures for year one tertiary students in Victoria for January 2008 show a 9.8% decline in student numbers enrolled in Architecture and Building courses (The Age, 2008). Not only are student numbers declining but in some States there is also a marked decline in the entry standards of students entering the courses as universities seek to fill the available places in the face of declining demand. In Queensland for example, there is a 25 point scale used to rank school leavers and to evaluate entry to tertiary study, called the Overall Position (OP) where one is the highest score. The school lever ranking or Overall Position cut off scores have declined from a high of OP5 in 2006 to OP12 in 2008, with some institutions offering Property and Construction courses to students with scores as low as OP18 (QTAC 2008).

While Built Environment student numbers are not growing at the rate of some other vocational courses, there has still been an overall increase in students entering these
courses at university. Given the increased total numbers of students there is concern over decreasing member numbers within the professional bodies and the increasing age profile of members within the Built Environment professionals bodies (Zillante, 2007)(Elliot & Warren 2005). It appears that despite growing numbers of graduates of Built Environment courses new entrants to the profession are failing to become full members of the professional bodies. This begs the question as to why students are failing to join built environment professional bodies on graduation. Why are student members of Built Environment professional bodies failing to convert to full membership status? The role of employers in the process is also brought into question with the possibility that declining professional body membership could be linked to employers finding alternatives to graduate entry and no longer demanding employee membership of professional bodies.

The research approach for this paper is based on two separate, but interrelated studies undertaken in Australia between 2007 and 2008. The studies address two issues. The first relates to students and potential graduate employees, the findings of which are reported in an earlier paper (Warren & Wilkinson 2008). The second study looks at the perspective of employers and the results of this study have been published (Wilkinson & Warren 2008). This paper will now draw on the key findings of these two research studies to analyse the implications for the Property and Construction professions moving forward.

2. Research Methodology

Both of the earlier research studies employed questionnaire surveys which were compiled by the Universities of Melbourne and Queensland in 2007. Adopting best practice principles in survey design as noted by Moser and Kalton (1971), the questionnaires were piloted and then amended prior to data collection. The student survey was administered to a range of student cohorts in three separate universities. The Universities selected to participate were leading course providers in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. The students were drawn from all year groups within the undergraduate program and from postgraduate students undertaking master level study. The survey was administered in the early part of Semester One, 2007. A total of six hundred and sixty one completed surveys were returned.

The survey of employers was distributed to a target group within Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne. The employer group was selected from known contacts rather than based on a random selection. Selection was based on a research design which sought to gain as wider representative sample as could reasonably be achieved within the time and budgetary constraints. Survey participant selection was based on four criteria. The first criterion was geographical spread. In order to correlate with the student survey data which was collected from the University of Melbourne, the University of Queensland and the University of Technology, Sydney, the employers were selected to be representative in each of the three cities of Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney. A spread of organisational size and influence was considered desirable in arriving at a representative sample. Organisations ranging from small local employers to larger employers with more than 30
professionals were selected from each region. Further organisational diversity was ensured through targeting of firms which could be considered to broadly fit into the categories of regional, national and international organisations. Finally, representation from private and public sectors was considered essential. This overall categorisation of survey participants was considered to be representative of the student destinations immediately following completion of their Built Environment degree courses. The total number of survey participants was twenty seven. Data from this survey was collected between September and November 2007.

3. Data Analysis and Results

The survey data from these two studies provides a rich source of information which has been published in the aforementioned reports. This paper will draw on selected key data points in order to draw comparison from the two groups. In fact the original surveys were designed with a view to undertaking this comparative analysis between the two sides in the employer/ employee relationship.

3.1 Survey Participants

The general make up of the survey participants can be summarised as follows;

Students
- Age: 42.8% under 21, 23.4% in the 22-25 year age group, 8% in the 26-34 year age group and 5.8% aged over 35 years.
- Gender: 60.5% male 39.5% female.
- Study Mode: full time 91.4%, 8.6% studying part time.
- Degree: 87.6% on undergraduate courses, 12.3% studying at post graduate level.
- Course: 56.2% studying property and 14.9% studying combined courses such as ‘Property and Construction’ or ‘Construction and Architecture’. Of the remaining students, 10.4% were studying Planning and 8.5% Construction courses.
- Career Aspirations: 45.3% intended working solely in Australia for the first two years after graduation, 34.5%, did not know whether they would remain in Australia to work in the two years following graduation. The remaining 20% intended working elsewhere. 74.8% of respondents believed that they will work overseas during their career.

Employers
- Sector: 76% private sector, 24% public sector
- 52% of the respondents were from International organisations 26% from national and 22% from regional organisations.
- All respondents were senior managers or directors of the organisation
- All respondents were male
- Organisation Size; 92% in large organisations with greater than 31 employees. the remainder were in organisations employing between 11 to 30 people.
- Area of Practice; This covers a wide spectrum as shown in Figure 4 below.
3.2 Professional Qualifications

The importance placed on academic and professional qualifications has a significant bearing on the employment prospects of a graduate seeking their first job. Employers considered both academic qualifications and professional body qualifications as very important. The results from employers are shown in Figure 5, where the respondents ranked their answers between very important, of some importance and of limited importance. 81% considered academic qualifications to be very important to their company, with 19% opting for ‘some importance’ and none considering academic qualifications to be of limited importance. In contrast, the results for the ranking of professional qualifications show 63% held professional qualifications as very important, 22% found them to be of some importance and 15% ranked them as of limited importance. From these results it would seem that academic qualifications are held in a higher regard by employers than professional qualifications, even though two thirds of employers consider professional qualifications to be very important.
Perhaps not surprisingly this result from employers relates relatively closely to the view of students. Obviously almost all students viewed academic qualifications to be of high importance which is only to be expected given their current participation in university study. 93.8% of students surveyed viewed professional qualifications as being either very important (64%) or of some importance (29.8%). Only 3.3% viewed professional qualifications as being of either no or limited importance and 2.3% did not know. Thus the perception of both employers and future potential employees coincides with a strong preference for academic and professional qualifications exhibited by both groups.

### 3.3 Professional body memberships

Employers have a significant preference for professional body membership with 74% indicating that they required employees to become members of the relevant professional institution. The employer respondents identified the professional organisations they require graduate employees to become members of, and these broadly reflected the area of practice in which the employer is engaged. The results in Figure 6 show the employer preferences regarding professional bodies.

![Figure 6 Professional Membership - Employer Preference](image)

The 26% of employers who did not require any professional body membership included all of the 16% reported above who stated professional qualifications were of limited importance. The remainder of the 26% were all drawn from those employers who ranked professional bodies as only of some importance.

This employer result does correlate again with the students’ perception, with 73.5% of students reporting professional body membership as important. However, the number who consider joining a professional body as very important was only 28.2% with 45.3% responding that membership was only of some importance. This contrasts with the stronger view of employers, where membership is a requirement and thus can be
considered very important to career progression. Indeed, students’ misconception of the importance employers place on professional membership is further illustrated in their response to questioning as to whether they thought employers expected graduates to obtain professional membership. This showed that 26.2%, of students did not know whether their employer would expect them to join a professional body. The largest percentage, 63.7% (309), stated they thought their employer would not expect them to join a professional body and only 10.1% thought employers’ would expect them to join. It is evident that there is clearly a disconnect between the employers expectations and the perceived expectation of students. This may lead to a delay in students commencing their route to full professional body membership in that they will not pursue professional body membership until they are encouraged by an employer to seek membership.

3.4 Reasons for joining professional institutions

The employers and students were both asked to rank the same list of attributes which might be considered reasons for joining a professional institution. The rankings were undertaken using the Likert Scale between one and five, with five being the highest option. These rankings were then used to create a league table of the most to least important attribute based on the mean score provided in the Likert score table. There is an interesting divergence in this data set between the employers and the student cohort. This divergence can be clearly seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Reasons for joining a professional body

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Student Rank</th>
<th>Employer Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enhances my career prospects</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides access to professional networks</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increases promotion</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increases employability in Australia</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will keep me up to date</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improves my salary</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increases employability outside Australia</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improves benefits paid by employers</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benchmark of professional skills and knowledge</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides access to CPD</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Student respondents appear to have a greater focus on their career prospects and promotion and consider the use of professional bodies as a method to network with other professionals. In contrast, the employers have a focus which is more aligned with gaining knowledge of current practice and acquiring skills, while also establishing an industry network. Employers also continued this focus on training and knowledge gaining when asked what they believed the students expectations of a professional body might be. In this instance employers ranked networking and structured training as top of the list well above career development and salary enhancement. It is however perhaps not surprising that this divergence between the career focus of students and the knowledge focus of employers is exhibited in these results. Students entering work are naturally intent on career progression while, in contrast employers are keen to see their new employees continue to learn and gain the skills needed to undertake their role within the organisation.

One issue of importance to the professional bodies is the apparent agreement by both study groups that professional body membership is not seen as a method of enhancing salary. Given the significant time commitment and costs incurred in undertaking the probationary period required by professional institutions, as well as the costs of undertaking final assessment to grant membership of the institutions, it might have been expected that some financial recognition of the attainment of professional status would have been expected by graduates and provided by employers.

### 3.5 Professional Membership and Fees

The final part of both surveys addressed issues relating to the payment of fees and the appropriateness of the current fee structures of the leading professional institutions. Respondents in both surveys were asked questions relating to the expectation of who would pay the fees of the professional bodies to hold membership. The payment of professional membership fees by employers has been an issue with suggestions that more students would join professional bodies if employers paid the fees. In response to these questions, 81.8% of employer firms surveyed did pay the professional fees of employees, with 22.2% only paying for a single membership and 63% of organisations willing to pay for multiple memberships.

This finding contrasts with the student perception. In the student survey, a large number failed to answer the question (28.7%) perhaps indicating a lack of knowledge in the area on which to base an answer. Indeed an even larger number, 201, indicated that they did not know the answer. This finding might be due to the students’ lack of exposure to the employment market. However 46.7% of students thought their employers would not pay professional fees, with only 7.4% considering that their employers would pay their fees. Thus very few of the students were confident that their future employer would pay professional institution fees and thus may explain the slow take up of professional membership as these students move into the employment market.

The results clearly show that employers and students have differing views on the payment of fees. The results demonstrate the importance that employers place on
professional memberships and their willingness to meet the costs involved. Students may be reluctant early in their university studies to engage with professional bodies in the belief that they will have to meet the substantial costs of achieving full professional body membership when they enter the workforce. Similarly graduates seeking employment or newly employed may be slow to take up professional body membership in the misconception that they will have to meet the costs of attaining and maintaining membership.

4. Conclusions

The results of these surveys of student and employer perceptions of professional organisation membership within the Built Environment profession have provided some valuable insights into the knowledge and attitudes of both parties, of the role of professional bodies and the respective motivations for seeking membership. They provide a useful resource both for those educating and preparing students for entry to the profession and for those administering the professional institutions. Emerging from the research is the common view of both employers and employees that professional qualifications are valued. The survey indicates, however, a distinct lack of understanding by students about the role of the professional bodies in their careers.

The most significant findings which this research study has revealed is that there are differing perceptions between employers and potential student employees with regard to their perceptions of professional bodies. Students clearly do not perceive the importance which employers place on professional qualifications and memberships. Employers see the professional bodies fulfilling a role in supporting them in helping to give their new employees the opportunity to learn and benchmark their skills while also establishing a network of peers. The student perception is much more oriented to career progression rather than ongoing learning. Thus there is a need for the professional bodies to recognise these differing drivers and to help to educate potential new members and the employers as to the prevailing expectations.

The differing view of the benefits of professional membership is further extended by the lack of understanding by students of the importance that employers place on such professional recognition and that this recognition means that most employers are willing to meet the costs of attaining and maintaining at least one professional institution membership. There is a clear role for both employers and the professional bodies to communicate to students early in their studies that professional memberships are valued by the industry and that the costs of attaining such membership is widely met by employers.

This research shows that there is a lack of clear communication between employers, professional bodies and students in Built Environment courses. There is an obvious need for the industry, professional bodies and university academics leading courses to collectively understand the requirements in the market for the next generation of qualified professionals and to work together to ensure that entrants to the industry are fully informed and prepared to meet the expectations of their future employers.
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