PROFESSIONAL ACCREDITATION AND PARTNERSHIPS: ESTABLISHMENT OF EDUCATIONAL BENCHMARKS IN AUSTRALASIA

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Abstract
A panel appointed by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors has recently visited most universities in Australia to accredit or reaccredit programs in General Practice, Quantity Surveying and Building Surveying. As is now the case in the United Kingdom, a system of partnerships between the Institution and universities is to be established in Australasia from 2004/2005 to replace the accreditation process. In order to maintain the partnerships, universities are likely to be required to achieve certain educational benchmarks. A wide range of benchmarks was investigated in the UK, but these were reduced to four, namely, quality of student intake, quality of teaching, quality of research and employability of graduates. These benchmarks were applied to programs in the UK in the recent round of reaccreditations with the result that accreditation was withdrawn in respect of many programs (although this is presently in dispute). However, it appears that similar benchmarks will be required in Australia. The four benchmark areas are discussed and related to similar data recorded by the tertiary system in Australia which may be used to contribute to similar benchmarks in Australasia.

Keywords: Educational benchmarks, Professional accreditation, Surveying programs

INTRODUCTION

The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) has recently established an accreditation panel to visit Australian universities to accredit or reaccredit some 11 programs in Quantity Surveying (construction economics), General practice (property) and Building Surveying. Accreditation was granted to all programs in Australia for 2002, 2003 and 2004. All program accreditations contain conditions and recommendations. After 2004, a system of partnerships between the RICS and universities will apply as it now does in the UK. Partnerships are to be based on trust between the parties. However, external examinations will continue and a number of benchmarks will have to be set and met to maintain the partnership. External examinations and benchmarks are important elements of a quality assurance system. Universities can learn a great deal from external examinations because the processes and procedures that university staff take for granted are scrutinised through "other eyes". Moreover, a point of reference is established that enables an international comparison of relevant programs.

The establishment of benchmarks will enable the non-university partner to gauge the acceptability of the program to the profession and therefore the community. The benchmarks are those that are applied in most countries that result in a comparison of the universities and the creation of a "league table" or "good universities guide". This

process is more or less comfortable for individual universities. But it is now, or is shortly to become, a fact of university life in Australia. Government funding of universities has fallen in real terms for many years. For example, only 50% of the funding for the University of Melbourne is provided from the public purse. The remaining 50% is raised by the University itself – mostly from the attraction of full-fee-paying international students. Funds provided by government (the other 50% in the case of the University of Melbourne) are to be allocated between the universities on competitive terms. About half of the 50% will be calculated on the basis of teaching and the other half on the basis of research. Benchmarks have been or are being created by the Australian Department of Education Science and Training (DEST) to cover research (the Institutional Grants Scheme) and teaching (the Quality of Teaching Survey).

The purpose of this paper is to outline the benchmarks that have been established in the UK for the purposes of forming partnerships with universities. First, the background in the UK is briefly discussed. Second, the aims of partnering are listed. Then each of the benchmarks is discussed in turn and parallels are outlined for the Australian context. Although the paper is illustrated using statistics and processes that apply in the author's institution, the University of Melbourne, all of the other universities in Australia with RICS accredited programs have similar data recorded. Finally, suggestions are outlined for implementing a process of introducing acceptable benchmarks to Australasian universities.

BACKGROUND

The RICS announced in early 2000 a proposed new relationship with UK universities (RICS, 2000a). The five yearly accreditation and re-accreditation process has been replaced with partnering. The partnering process is about the RICS and the university establishing common goals and working together to achieve these goals (RICS 2001a, p3). The details of accreditation and re-accreditation have been devolved to the universities. The aims of the partnership are:
- To maintain threshold standards,
- To attract bright students into the profession,
- To promote research in surveying related areas,
- To more responsively developing courses to meet the needs of the profession, and
- To improve professional-education links (op cit p4).

The RICS in its partnerships with academia has distilled the range of possible benchmarks to four, namely:
- Student intake quality with the requirement that 75% of the entry cohort achieve an average entrance performance.
- Quality of teaching with the requirement that staff have met teaching quality standards set by the relevant government department.
- Research quality with the requirement that the relevant university department achieves a minimum grading in a range set by the relevant government department.
- Employment of graduates with the requirement that at least 75% of a completing cohort obtains employment in a relevant field.

In the first instance, 22 universities entered into partnerships with the Institution (RICS, 2000b). During 2001, it was stated that 25 out of (then) 37 universities with which the RICS has entered into partnerships "would not have met RICS minimum standards when (the partnerships) were first announced in January 2000, but they have now restructured, or revamped courses in order to do so" (RICS 2001b). Recent additions have increased this number to 47 (RICS, 2001c).

Failure to meet these benchmarks resulted in a number of accreditations being withdrawn in UK or partnerships dissolved. Several universities closed their surveying departments due to the lack of demand from students to enter surveying programs and/or the lack of demand from employers to place graduates. This has led to serious concern in UK to the extent that *inter alia* a resolution to reinstate all of the dis-accredited programs was put to an Extraordinary General Meeting of the RICS in November, 2001 through Ordinary Resolutions 2 and 3 (RICS, 2001d, pp5-8).

Ordinary Resolution 2 proposed that the decision to withdraw accreditation be revoked and rescinded and Ordinary Resolution 3 proposed that RICS members in the relevant regions should be properly consulted on any review of the accreditation and training process (loc cit). In the event, Ordinary Resolution 2 was lost and Ordinary Resolution 3 was carried (RICS 2001e).

Thus the benchmarks have quite serious implications for all of the stakeholders. It is obvious that courses that do not achieve the benchmarks will lose accreditation with the RICS. It is also obvious that the partnering process will be fully explained in consultation with local professional bodies. During the recent visits to Australasian universities, it was noted that the RICS panels asked many questions in respect of these four benchmarks whilst drawing out a discussion of the Australian equivalents and the way in which they were considered by each university.

THE AIMS

Maintain threshold standards
The maintenance of the four threshold standards is self-evident. The details required in the course reports produced for accreditation and re-accreditation purposes contain the environmental factors and indicators that could affect standards. These include details about resources, teaching and learning, assessment procedures, student progression, student experience, staff development, industry contributions and external examiners.

Details similar to the threshold standards are also monitored by the universities. The University of Melbourne has an annual Operational Performance Review that covers all of the thresholds. A panel of high-ranking officers of the University (including the Vice-Chancellor, President of the Academic Board) visits each faculty in turn to discuss the thresholds.   Particular attention is paid to the thresholds that are not being met or are marginal and the Faculty is expected to have prepared a strategy for improvement.

Quality assurance procedures are well advanced at Australian universities.

Attract bright entrants into the profession
Universities throughout Australia are in competition for students in order to be able to deliver courses efficiently having regard to the available resources. However, most universities have a catchment area from which a very large proportion of its students is recruited. A relatively small proportion of students move to interstate universities and a tiny proportion proceeds overseas for Bachelors courses. The universities are trying to attract the brightest students into their programs and this in turn should ensure that the brightest students available ultimately enter the profession.

Most universities have marketing plans revolving around attendance at schools in the catchment areas. Presentations are made to students and their parents at course information sessions.   The government managed admissions centre produces figures of student first choices for each program. These can also be used as a guide to course demand.

Employers in industry are in constant contact with staff in the Faculty of Architecture Building and Planning at the University of Melbourne with requests for assistance in finding one of our graduates or industry year students to take up a position in their firms. The Faculty maintains a specific notice board on which positions vacant in property, construction and quantity surveying are advertised. It also maintains a file of employers with situations vacant and students looking for work. We also provide career information sessions to which are invited several employers at a time to speak to groups of students about specific careers and applications for positions. The RICS recently hosted a careers night which was a great success. Over 20 major firms were represented and over 100 students attended.

Promote research in surveying related areas
Research is carried out by all university departments. However, although some departments and universities are stronger than others, all are expected to be involved. Future funding of universities, faculties, schools and departments and specific courses and programs will depend upon it.

The Australian Research Council provides the most prestigious and highly sought after research grants. There are several different types, but the two main types are discovery grants and linkage grants. The linkage grants require that a linkage be established between a university or universities and private and/or some public businesses to fund specific programs. The universities have had significant success in winning these sorts of grants.

Responsively develop courses to meet the needs of the profession
Judging by the demand by industry for graduates in property, building and quantity surveying, the programs offered by Australian universities meet the needs of the professions (see above).

It is noted that the duration of undergraduate programs must be a minimum of three years full-time and postgraduate programs must be a minimum of one year full-time (or the equivalent in part time) (RICS, 2001a, p5). In Australia, building and quantity surveying programs are required (by the AIB and the AIQS) to be a minimum of four years full-time whilst most of the property programs are of three years' duration. Most of the programs contain or require an element of industry experience prior to

graduation. In some cases this is organised and monitored by the university. In others, the university simply leaves the finding of employment to the student.

Improve professional-education links
Property, construction and quantity surveying courses in Australia are accredited by their local professional bodies including the Australian Property Institute, the Australian Institute of Building, the Australian Institute of Building Surveyors and the Australian Institute of Quantity Surveyors. An extensive degree of cooperation between universities and the professions has existed for some time. Most departments offering courses in these fields have Course Advisory Boards on which sit representatives of the professions who have links, formal or informal, with the relevant professional institutions. Universities have found, often to their surprise, that the professions are greatly interested in the universities, in particular, in having an involvement in what is offered at the universities and, of course, in the graduate and work experience students.

This interest has been extended to the RICS' involvement in Australia which came about principally as a result of the universities' requirement for a truly international accreditation. This is despite the reciprocity agreements between the RICS and Australian institutes allowing portability of the "home" professional qualification to the "host" country. Discussions are under way between the RICS and Australian institutions to promote cooperation between the bodies rather than competition. This writer considers it unlikely that local institutions will lose membership to the RICS. It is more likely that those requiring RICS membership will also require membership of the local body.

It was also thought that RICS accreditation would assist in the recruitment of overseas students. However, many of the countries from which large numbers of overseas students obtain entry to Australian universities have recently insisted on their own accreditation procedures, in particular, Malaysia and Hong Kong.

THE BENCHMARKS

Quality of student intake
The RICS Student Entry Benchmark is that 75% of the first year intake into a program must obtain an average score of 17 points at A level (where an A scores 10, a B scores 8 and a C scores 6). The score of 17 was the average score in UK in 2000. The remaining 25% of the intake covered students having a non-standard entry.

Student quality in Australia is clearly measured in terms of the ENTER (Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Rank). It is emphasised that this is a rank and not a score. It is based on the performance of secondary school students in year twelve. Many universities have a "clearly in" rank set for each program and this is the rank that tends to be publicised. Most universities also have a "clearly out" rank. Students between these two ranks form an additional group (called the middle band) from which further selections are made (usually around 20% of the total intake although that varies from course to course and university to university) and the last student in this group is the one that establishes the true ENTER cut-off. Full fee-paying students are selected down to the "clearly out" rank.

The University of Melbourne follows the above procedure, but many other universities have alternative selection procedure, eg, by interview, by folio, by additional testing. Although these do not select their intakes using the ENTER, the cut-off rank can be established. Many universities have special entry programs for disadvantaged students, for special groups and for mature age entry. In addition, many international students are selected after their home country scores have been given an equivalent ENTER (similar to the tariff in the UK) and still others are re-ranked after taking into account special circumstances. The creation of a suitable Australian benchmark will need to take these different arrangements into account.

Based upon the experience of the Faculty of Architecture Building and Planning in respect of offering places to students with UK A levels, the guaranteed entry score into the Property and Construction program is BBC (or 22) and the minimum entry score (below which students are clearly out) is CCC (or 18). This corresponds in 2001 to a clearly in rank of 87.60 and a clearly out rank of 80.00. It follows that the UK score of 17 approximately corresponds to an ENTER of a little less than 80.00. Thus a similar benchmark could be that 75% of the student intake achieves an average ENTER of 75.00 to 80.00. The other 25% of students will include the non-standard students from TAFE colleges, foundation programs and the tertiary access program (for disadvantaged students).

Quality of teaching
Universities in the UK are graded by the Quality Assurance Agency in the six following areas (RICS 2001a):
- Curriculum design, contact, organisation,
- Teaching learning and assessment,
- Student progression and achievement,
- Student support and guidance,
- Learning resources and
- Quality assurance and enhancement.

The grading takes place on a four point scale from 1 (worst) to 4 (best). The RICS threshold is at least five 3s or, in other words, no more than one 2 score or lower.

In Australia, each course in each university has a policy in which the quality of teaching is established by measuring student responses to a series of questions. These surveys are for internal comparisons and, at the University of Melbourne, are considered during the Operational Performance Review discussed above.

At the time of writing, there are two sources of comparison between universities:
- the official Course Experience Questionnaire in the process of being extended (McInnes *et al*, 2001) and
- the unofficial Good Universities Guide (Ashenden & Milligan, 2001).

Along with the internal quality of teaching surveys, the data consist of students' opinions about a range of topics with answers recorded on a five-point scale. The results so far have been reasonably volatile with some universities obtaining returns from a statistically insignificant sample being compared with others that have substantial returns. Moreover, the ranking of universities changes radically from year to year but across a very narrow range of scores within which all universities are

ranked. Apart from these surveys of students, there has been no official comparative process of inspection or review of programs although most universities have a five-yearly internal review process in place.

The University of Melbourne's Quality of teaching Survey uses the 5 point scale. Subjects with scores in excess of 4.5 are recorded and the numbers are used as a gauge to teaching quality in the faculties on a comparative basis. Subjects that score below 3 are also recorded and used to contribute to an overall assessment of quality.

Quality of research
The RICS Quality of Research benchmark is a rank of 2D in the four-yearly Research Assessment Exercise. Readers will be familiar with the form of the Research Assessment Exercise in the UK (RAE, 2001a). It requires submissions from educational institutions on a discipline by discipline basis. Included in the submissions are information on staff in post on the census date and on publications and other forms of assessable output which they have produced during the assessment period. Up to four items of research output per individual may be listed by each institution. Details are to be provided in each submission in totals and per research active staff of supervision of research assistants and research students, studentships, publications and research income (RAE, 2001b).

The disciplines are ranked as follows:

5*   Quality that equates to attainable levels of international
       excellence in more than half of the research activity submitted
       and attainable levels of national excellence in the remainder

5   Quality that equates to attainable levels of international
       excellence in up to half of the research activity submitted and to
       attainable levels of national excellence in virtually all of the
       remainder.

4   Quality that equates to attainable levels of national excellence in
       virtually all of the research activity submitted, showing some
       evidence of international excellence.

3a   Quality that equates to attainable levels of national excellence in
       over two thirds of the research activity submitted, possibly
       showing evidence of international excellence.

3b   Quality that equates to attainable levels of national excellence in
       more than half of the research activity submitted.

2   Quality that equates to attainable levels of national excellence in
       up to half of the research activity submitted.

1   Quality that equates to attainable levels of national excellence in
       none, or virtually none, of the research activity submitted

In addition, rankings include a reference to the proportion of the staff who are defined as research active as follows:

A	95-100% staff submitted
B	80-94.9%
C	60-79.9%
D	40-59.9%
E	20-39.9%
F	below 20%

Thus a rank of 2D suggests that at least 40% of the staff associated with the program are research active and that up to half (but at least 10%) of their research activity is considered to be of national excellence. There are two elements to research quality, first, the depth of research, and second, is the spread of research activity throughout the department.

In the Australian context, the depth of the research quality has been represented by Research Quantum now replaced by the Institutional Grants Scheme, but the spread of research activity is monitored by the individual universities.

Research Quantum has been measured throughout the Australian university system in terms of competitive research grants won (inputs) and publications and research higher degree completions (outputs). For 2001, some $230 million was allocated to Australian universities based on a formula in which the inputs and outputs were weighted.

The formula is to change for 2002 and for subsequent years and it is now known as the Institutional Grants Scheme (DEST, 2002). Some $257 million is to be distributed according to a formula which takes account of:

- research student places (30%);
- research related income (60%); and
- research outputs (10%).

Each of these is weighted. Research student places are weighted by way of sciences, engineering and medical fields (4.77) and other (2.0). Property, construction and quantity surveying are included in other. Research related income is currently not weighted although provision is mad to weight differently the Cooperative Research Centres. Research output is weighted using four types of output as representative of all outputs: book (5), chapter in book, article in scholarly journal and fully refereed conference paper (each 1).

The University of Melbourne distributes funds to faculties (the budgetary units) on the basis of the individual faculties' research depth, ie, its overall performance. As to the spread of research activity, the definition of research active staff at the University of Melbourne is taken over a three-year rolling period. It is made up of one research output point (meaning the equivalent of one research paper or chapter in book or conference paper) plus one of the following:
- Three additional research output points, or

- Supervision of one research higher degree to completion, or
- Obtaining $5,000 in research funding.

Academic staff have an incentive to be research active if they wish to be considered for promotion or for faculty funding for research and conference attendance and for study leave.

Both of these elements are scrutinised during the Operational Performance Review (see above).

Employability of graduates
The RICS Employability of Students benchmark is a requirement that 75% of a graduating cohort find employment in a relevant occupation that could lead to RICS membership.

Employability figures for Australia are collected by the Graduate Careers Council of Australia based on a survey posted to all graduates/graduands in April of the year following the year in which they completed their programs. The figures classify each person by several categories of employment, whether full time or part time, whether seeking employment, whether not available for employment or whether they are still studying. A summary is available (GCCA, 2001) and details are recorded for each field. The published figures are similar to those in the UK except that, in many cases, certain courses are amalgamated.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the reaction of the stakeholders in UK, it is obviously mandatory that any benchmarks that are set are agreed with the stakeholders including the universities and the professional institutions that accredit the programs.

It seems reasonable to suggest that benchmarks similar to those in use by the RICS in the UK can be developed in Australia. First, the quality of entry can be assessed using the established ENTER figures. Second, teaching quality can be assessed using the revised Course Experience Questionnaire results once the tertiary education system has agreed to adopt them. Third, research quality can be set using the records of the Institutional Grants Scheme. Finally, the employability of graduates can be ascertained from the findings of the Graduate Careers Council of Australia. Other countries in the region will no doubt have similar statistics that can be adapted to the RICS thresholds.

It is suggested that the universities keep accurate records from 2002 in order to build up a time series of the benchmark results. For many of the universities, the figures may be agglomerated over all courses in a faculty or school or department. Ways in which the figures can be disaggregated may need to be found. In this regard, it is suggested that a detailed checklist be developed and forwarded to RICS accredited universities to establish the difficulties arising out of the availability of data versus the requirements of the benchmarks. Input needs to be sought from the course providers and the course advisory boards. It also needs to be sought from the local professional institutions.

The process of partnership may well be a useful model for the Australian experience.

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