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Understanding the diversity of non-specialised units within Australian property degrees

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Keywords: Property education in Australia; professional accreditation; non-specialised subjects; undergraduate transition.

Understanding the diversity of non-specialised units within Australian property degrees

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Abstract

Building on the recommendations of the Bradley Review (2008), the Australian Federal government intends to promote a higher level of penetration of tertiary qualification across the broader Australian community which is anticipated to result in increased levels of standardisation across university degrees. In the field of property, tertiary academic programs are very closely aligned to the needs of a range of built environment professions and there are well developed synergies between the relevant professional bodies and the educational institutions. The strong nexus between the academic and the professional content is characterised by ongoing industry accreditation which nominates a range of outcomes which the academic programs must maintain across a range of specified metrics. Commonly, the accrediting bodies focus on standard of minimum requirements especially in the area of specialised subject areas where they require property graduates to demonstrate appropriate learning and attitudes. In addition to nominated content fields, in every undergraduate degree program there are also many other subjects which provide a richer experience for the students beyond the merely professional. This study focuses on the non-specialised knowledge field which varies across the universities offering property degree courses as every university has the freedom to pursue its own policy for these non-specialised units. With universities being sensitive to their role of in the appropriate socialisation of new entrants, first year units have been used as a vehicle to support students' transition into university education and the final year units seek to support students' integration into the professional world. Consequentially, many property programs have to squeeze their property-specific units to accommodate more generic units for both first year and final year units and the resulting diversity is a feature of the current range of property degrees across Australia which this research will investigate. The matrix of knowledge fields nominated by the Australian Property Institute for accreditation of degrees accepted for Certified Practising Valuer (CPV) educational requirement and the complementary requirements of the other major accrediting body (RICS) are used to classify and compare similarities and differences across property degrees in the light of the streamlining anticipated from the Bradley Review

Keywords: Property education in Australia; professional accreditation; non-specialised subjects; undergraduate transition.

Introduction

Arising from the recommendations of its 'Review of Australian higher education' (The Bradley Review 2008), the Australian federal government is currently establishing a Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) as an independent body with powers to regulate university and non-university higher education providers, monitor quality and set standards (TEQSA 2010). It will register higher education providers, carry out evaluations of standards and performance, protect and assure the quality of international education and streamline current regulatory arrangements. (Commonwealth of Australia 2009).

With the patent intention of preparing graduates for employment in the property profession, property education is multidisciplinary in nature modelling the world of practice. The study of town planning, economics, law, accounting, tax and building studies are integral components of property degrees as well as core property units, not studied in other degrees. All stakeholders (academics, industry, students and graduates) have long agreed that the curriculum must be integrated, where concepts from a variety of areas e.g. valuation, law and economics are taught in conjunction rather than in isolation (Koulizos 2006; Newell 2003). Many of these subjects are offered as generic (introductory) units to students with a multidisciplinary background (Susilawati and Blake 2009). In a multidisciplinary curriculum, students are taught to 'integrate, analyse, innovate, synthesize, communicate and work together with others from diverse backgrounds and experiences.' (Butler, Guntermann & Wolverson 1998, p. 54)

As highlighted by the Bradley Review, heralding an era of increased standardisation, it is now important to review the nature of current property course units to determine how best to respond. Having grown out of the universities of technology of the Dawkins era thirty years ago, most of the property degrees across Australia have been developed in tandem with the requirements of professional accreditation. Bodies such as the Australian Property Institute (API), the variously titled statutory registration boards where extant (Queensland, New South Wales, Western Australia) and other internationally focussed organisations (such as the RICS and the Singapore Institute of Surveyors and Valuers, for example) have all contributed to the development of Australian property degrees.

With the most prescriptive of approaches, the API's 'knowledge fields' can be found at the heart of all the property degrees which it has accredited in the past decade, and even more especially for programs seeking to comply with 'certified practising valuer' educational status. Hence, almost all accredited universities offer similar core property units to meet these minimum standards. Whilst recognising this unifying element, this study focuses on the balance of the academic program i.e. on the non-specialised areas of knowledge which vary from one university to another. After considering the broad structure of API accredited property degrees across Australia, a more detailed matrix of knowledge fields is used to classify and compare similarities and differences across property degrees in Queensland.

Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA)

The Bradley Review affirmed that the reach, quality and performance of Australian higher education system are central to Australia's economic and social progress. Moreover, Australia needs a quality higher education system to sustain the international education industry which is Australia's third largest export (Bradley et al. 2008 p.4).

The setting up of TEQSA is re-establishing an emphasis on learning and teaching quality as the bedrock of the Australian higher education system (Commonwealth of Australia 2009, p.15). TEQSA will work together with existing quality assurance activities such as conducted by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) and other professional organisations (TEQSA 2010). It will accredit providers, evaluate the performance of institutions and programs, encourage best practice, simplify current regulatory arrangements and provide greater national consistency. Currently, in the sphere of property education at the tertiary level, the Australian Property Institute (API) and Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) are the principal professional accrediting organisations. Their accreditation criteria specify standard minimum requirements (threshold and knowledge fields) for property graduates to attain. Both the API and RICS use various criteria to promote high quality in property education such as ensuring satisfactory pedagogy, staff quality, practicality and industrial linkages (Hefferan & Ross 2010).

TEQSA will take the lead in coordinating this work and establishing objective and comparative benchmarks of quality and performance. The agency will collect richer data and monitor performance in areas such as student selection, retention and exit standards, and graduate employment (Commonwealth of Australia 2009, p.31). The data collected will be populated for 'My University' website in 2012 which will inform students about institutions, courses and pathways and showcase the quality of Australia's higher education providers and are mooted to include: student to staff ratios, results of student satisfaction surveys, measures of graduate skills, graduate outcomes, information about fees, information about access to student services and quality of teaching and learning outcomes. (Gillard 2010)

The performance of universities will be linked to performance funding and improved indexation arrangements to ensure that universities are resourced to deliver on improved standards (Commonwealth of Australia 2009, p.15). From 2012, those universities that meet agreed institution level performance targets will receive performance funding. The amount of funding available is roughly equivalent to 2.5 per cent of funding currently provided for teaching and learning, as recommended in the Bradley Review (Commonwealth of Australia 2009, p.33). In anticipation of the federal government's proposals, the following discussion of the structure of current property degrees in Australian universities provides a reference point from which to consider the opportunities arising from the change which Canberra is indicating.

Property Courses in Australia – role of professional accreditation

In 2010, thirteen Australian universities are offering seventeen undergraduate property degrees professionally accredited by the Australian Property Institute (API).

There are also property degrees which are accredited by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) and graduate programs. Of the API accredited programs, three of the institutions are in New South Wales, five in Queensland, three in Victoria and one each in South Australia and Western Australia (Australian Property Institute 2010). Table 1 lists the undergraduate property degree programs in Australia currently endorsed by the API and/or the RICS with each program being reviewed on a five-year cycle.

To be considered for academic accreditation, the API (2010) requires a property program to cover the following knowledge fields: building studies; land use/planning; commercial law; financial accounting; property investment; property economics; property law; property management; property valuation. In addition, to meet the academic requirement for Certified Practising Valuer (CPV) status, programs must also demonstrate their coverage of advanced valuation, property market analysis and statutory valuation fields of knowledge.

Five of the API's knowledge fields – economics, building studies, land use/planning, financial accounting and commercial law – are offered by complementary disciplines as core units of their main degree. For example, building studies and planning are offered by built and environment disciplines and the other two units are offered by Faculty of Business. Property courses have traditionally comprised units from various business and built environment related disciplines (Susilawati & Blake 2009).

In addition to the API, the other principal professional body by which the majority of property degrees in Australia are also accredited (see Table 1) is the RICS. The RICS's approach to recognising an academic program focuses on broader benchmarks relating to the ability of the provider institution to maintain an acceptable level of performance across four nominated categories. The RICS's benchmarks for academic institutional accreditation define the following categories:

- academic standard of entering students as measured by their tertiary entry score or equivalent
- the teaching quality of the program
- the research output performance of the academic staff teaching on the accredited degree
- the employability of the graduates.

The details of the teaching program are benchmarked annually by external examination by panels of professional and academic experts appointed by the RICS which assess and report annually.

Adopting the API's fields of knowledge paradigm, as detailed Table 1, seven of the thirteen property courses are offered under a business faculty banner. For property degree courses offered through a business faculty introductory economics, accounting and law units/subjects are common to the property courses or other business degrees. The six other property courses are offered under built environment structure where units/subjects such as building studies and land use/planning are core for both property and the related disciplines such as construction management, quantity surveying and planning (Susilawati & Blake 2009).

Table 1: API and RICS endorsed undergraduate property degree programs in Australia

University	Faculty	Duration – full time	API and/or RICS
New South Wales			
University of New South Wales	Faculty of Built Environment	4 years	both
University of Technology Sydney	Design, Architecture and Building	2 yrs FT + 2 yrs PT	both
University of Western Sydney	School of Economics and Finance, Faculty of Business	3 years	API
Victoria			
University of Melbourne	Faculty of Architecture, Building & Planning	5 years (inc Master degree)	both
Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) University	School of Property, Construction & Project Management, College of Design & Social Context	4 years	both
Deakin University	School of Management & Marketing, Faculty of Business & Law	3 years	both
Queensland			
Bond University	Mirvac School of Sustainable Development – Institute of Sustainable Development & Architecture	2 years (3 semester per year)	both
Central Queensland University	Faculty of Arts, Business, Informatics & Education	3 years	API
Queensland University of Technology	School of Urban Development, Faculty of Built Environment & Engineering	4 years	both
University of Sunshine Coast	Faculty of Business	3 years	both
University of Queensland	Faculty of Business, Economics & Law	3 years	both
South Australia			
University of South Australia	School of Commerce, Division of Business	3 years	API
Western Australia			
Curtin University of Technology	School of Economics & Finance, Curtin Business School	3 years	API

Source: Author compiled from UNSW 2010; UTS 2010; UWS 2010; University of Melbourne 2010; RMIT (2010; Deakin 2010; Bond 2010; CQU 2010; QUT 2010; USC 2010; UQ 2010; UniSA 2010; Curtin 2010.

The ambivalence of a clear 'home faculty' for property degrees may be in part be a reflection of the scope of study but is also likely to be a consequence of the evolution of the professional roles which property practitioners represent. The owner/occupier or landlord and tenant relationship is at the heart of all property activity and of the legal rights and interests which are managed. Where long term ownership of landed assets was the traditional structure (e.g. in the UK) the built environment focus was the norm. In jurisdictions where ownership was more flexible and capital more broadly distributed across society (e.g. USA) the role of borrowed capital and property as a commodity strong representation from occupiers and from lenders. This is now represented in academic property programs by a business faculty host. The Australian model incorporates elements of each approach and the focus continues to shift even now as Australian society considers its approach to issues of sustainability of the economy promoted land as a subset of business with versus the environment with a carbon pollution reduction scheme or a carbon tax, inevitably impacting on property – its study and practice.

Diversity of non-specialised units/subjects within professionally accredited property degrees

Beyond the core of content prescribed by the strictures of professional accreditation, product differentiation between property courses in Australia is ensured by the diversity of the non-specialised unit/subject offerings. The range of subjects is likely to be a result of interaction between individual faculty or university policy, advances in technology, funding restrictions, access to other resources and/or local demands of the professional world and the local or regional economy. Universities as educational establishments also have traditions and philosophies which frame their products and influence delivery methods of the units/subjects and cater for the education of the person with complementary coverage of social, ethical and self developmental elements as integral part of the learning outcomes of a well balanced property degree. (Armitage 1988)

Considering some the international perspectives, in the United States, Born (2003) reports that the primary American accreditation body for schools of business (American Assembly of Collegiate School of Business) emphasises course material should integrate elements of: global awareness/ international perspectives; ethics and social involvement; technology application in business; critical thinking; and oral and written communications (Born 2003 p.239) noting that higher education in real estate needs to sharpen written communication and critical thinking skills, including decision making.

Advances in information and communication technologies (ICT) play a significant role in teaching, learning and administrative support in universities (Boyd 2005; Newell & Eves 2000). While students generally are in favour of the use of ICT to enhance the learning experience and to provide flexibility, face-to-face teaching and learning remains highly valued (Bradley et al. 2008 p.72). Moreover, the increased use of ICT had enhanced student satisfaction and facilitated access to education (Alexander & Bajada 2008) which is one of the principal tenets of the Bradley Review and current policy initiatives at the federal level (Gillard 2010).

However, changes in the higher education sector, including reduced sector funding, have led to innovations in curriculum design and course delivery and assessment. Bradley et al. (2008) state that most universities increased student-to-staff ratios as the primary means of remaining financially viable. In aggregate, it reports the student-to-staff ratio increased by 57 per cent from 1990 to 2007. For some universities this has resulted in a focus on online programs and for others this has meant the introduction of larger generic units that are offered in a multidisciplinary context. (Newell 2007)

In many programs, it is common for students enrolled in engineering and business degrees to undertake generic multidisciplinary units in their first year of study. Although these students may have different career aspirations they generally commence university study with a comparable level of knowledge and understanding of their discipline areas. Generic first year units have presented difficulties in establishing a strong property context early in the degree programs – typically less than 25% of Year One subjects are property-related – with the need for broader institutional socialisation recognised as being significant to student commitment and acculturation, thereby increasing student retention and degree completion rates. (Lau 2003)

In the final year of their academic studies, students from different disciplines may again study together in the completion of second majors or minors or in integrating capstone projects. The Bachelor of Urban Development program at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) offers multidisciplinary study at an introductory, intermediate and advanced level in the completion of compulsory units for the degree program. (Susilawati & Blake 2009) At other universities with more flexible learning structures, students may choose the sequencing of their subjects as long as prerequisite leading is demonstrated. Blake and Susilawati (2009) found that students generally possessed an appropriate level of technical and ‘soft skills’ to enter the professional realm with learning development required in some areas. All responding stakeholders agreed that the transition from university to work was made more seamless through greater engagement with industry through field work and work experience incorporated from the intermediate stages of the property course.

Work experience has long been imbedded in the curriculum of QUT, RMIT and University of South Australia property degrees while Massey University (NZ) is also encourages students to spend time in the workforce while gaining credit towards their degree. (Callanan & McCarthy 2003) The benefits of work experience are twofold: potential employers are assisted in the recruitment process (‘try before you buy’) and students have the opportunity to obtain part- or full-time employment in the property industry and develop their own practice-based skill set to incorporate in their continuing study.

Finally, each university has its policy on non-specialised units/subjects. Many property programs have to squeeze their specialised property units into the central period of the student’s program of study to accommodate more generic units’ need to be sited in the first year and final years. First year units are used to support students’ transition into university education with final year units supporting their exit to the

professional world. The diversity of generic units is strongly characterised by the individual approaches and policies of the host faculty and university.

Comparison between API-endorsed property degrees in Queensland

Five universities in Queensland offer undergraduate property degrees – more than the more populous states with three each – three of which are housed in business faculties (CQU, UQ and USC) and two (Bond, QUT) in built environment faculties. QUT's property course is offered by the same school as construction management and planning degrees and all are within a Faculty of Built Environment and Engineering whereas Bond's much smaller Institute of Sustainable Development and Architecture combines two so-named built environment schools. The property degree at the University of Queensland is supported by built environment degrees in planning and architecture which are now in a different faculty with the property degree's move to business.

Table 2 and Table 3 illustrate the units/subjects that are offered by five universities in Queensland. Table 2 shows that most of the universities offer the knowledge fields required by API as individual subjects but others combine some aspects into broader syllabus and the stage of program when offered also varies. Table 3 shows a range of units offered by the universities. Only few units are similar which supports the product differentiation strength of property courses.

Table 2: Units offered by property programs in Queensland based on API's knowledge field requirement

Knowledge fields/units/subjects	Bond	CQU	QUT	USC	UQ
Building Studies	I	I,I,A	I, I	I, I	I
Land Use/Planning	I	A	M	M	M, I
Commercial Law	I	I	I	I	I
Financial Accounting	I	I	A	I	I
Property Investment/ Finance	M,M	M, M	A	A	M,M
Property Economics	M	A	M,M	I	
Property Law	M	M	M,M	I	M
Property Management	A	A	A	A	A
Property Valuation	M	I	I	M	I
Advanced and Specialised Valuation	A	A	M	A	A, A
Property Market Analysis	A		A	M	
Statutory Valuation	A	M	M	A	A
Property Development	M		M,A	A	A

Notes: The classification basis is via unit code the first digit is assumed as year level (1, 2 and 3) unless otherwise advised.

I = introductory units (offered in first or second year)

M = offered in the middle of the course (second or third year)

A = advanced units offered at the end of the course (third or fourth year)

Source: Author, derived from Bond 2010; CQU 2010; QUT 2010; USC 2010; UQ 2010.

Table 2 shows that all universities offered building studies and commercial law at the introductory level. The majority of property-related units are offered in the middle (M) or final year (A) of the property course. This confirms that majority first year units are generic units, thus present difficulties in establishing a strong property context early in the degree programs.

On the other hand, property management and advanced valuation are offered mostly in the final year. Financial accounting is offered in the first year for all universities, except QUT where it is a final year offering. Some of the API's 'fields of knowledge' may not be explicitly mentioned in Table 2 as the subject title may differ or, as at QUT for example, be combined as with statutory and specialist valuation to become one subject or the content be variously spread across a range of subjects *viz.* property market analysis.

Table 3 shows a range of technical non-property related skills and soft skills that are offered in property degrees. All the units/subjects listed in both Table 2 and Table 3 are compulsory (not elective) units however, in some cases, non-core subjects may be mutually exclusive options, taken from within a range of nominated alternatives.

Table 3: Non-specialised units/subjects offered in property degrees in Queensland

Non-specialised units/subjects	Bond	CQU	QUT	USC	UQ
Other: Economics	I	I	I	I	I
Other: Research project/ Capstone Project	A	A		A	A
Other: Project management	I		I	A	
Other: Management and Organisational Behaviour		I		I	A, I
Other: Marketing Theory and Practice	M			I	I
Other: Communication Skills	I		I		M
Other: Knowledge and Critical Thinking	I				
Other: Responsibility (Cultural and Ethical Values)	I				
Other: Leadership, Innovation and Teamwork	I				
Other: Sustainability	I		I		
Other: Property Resource Analysis	M				
Other: Computer-based Information Systems	I	M			M
Other: Business policy and strategy			A		A
Other: Built Environment	I	M			
Other: Geographic Information Systems (GIS)	E	M			
Other: Work Integrated Learning	A		A		

Notes: The classification on the basis of unit code the first digit is assumed as year level (1, 2 and 3)
 I = introductory units (offered in first or second year)
 M = offered in the middle of the course (second or third year)
 A = advanced units offered at the end of the course (third or fourth year)
 E = elective

Source: Author, derived from Bond 2010; CQU 2010; QUT 2010; USC 2010; UQ 2010.

In addition to targeted property economics subject, all universities require students to study introductory economics. Some other technical subjects – such as marketing, organisational behaviour, project management, computer-based information systems, GIS – are also variously offered. In most of the universities, relevant aspects of communication skills, critical thinking and teamwork are integrated in discipline specific content rather than also being addressed from a more generic world view as at Bond. The introductory units/subjects provide transition into university education through the study of communication skills, critical thinking, cultural and ethical values, leadership, initiative and teamwork and sustainability.

In the final year, most universities require students to complete an integrating project such as a research or capstone project. In some universities, work experience may be an elective and may not be linked to a specific study program as offered by QUT. Both capstone and work integrated learning units are structured to assist students' transition to the professional world.

The diversity of generic units (both for the first and final years) reflects the imprimatur of each university's and faculty's culture – policies, practices and procedures with QUT vaunting its corporate motto of a 'University for the real world' through a strong emphasis on work integrated learning for students in their final year. Bond University seeks to embed socially responsible and ethical practice by requiring four generic university-wide subjects to be completed by all undergraduate students early in their study program.

Potential impact of TEQSA proposals for property courses

Having considered the property programs from predominantly the academic intuitions' perspectives, the potential external influence generated by TEQSA might have positive or negative impacts for property courses and the trajectory of any such change is currently unclear due to the policies not having been confirmed and hence further research will be required on the implementation. However, the following points may be surmised:

- Positive impact:
 - TEQSA might require property courses to have a stronger focus on property units in the first year and on more advanced property units in the final year. Therefore programs may need to reduce non-specialised units overall.
- Negative impact:
 - Reduced diversity of unit offerings may eliminate point of differences or uniqueness of each property program
- Unresolved impact:
 - Academic staff and the associated administrative framework may need to be expanded to negotiate changes to policies and practices at the level of the individual institution.
 - The established linkages with the professional accrediting bodies may also complicate the modifications anticipated by the federal government.

Conclusion

To date, the federal government's proposals for increased standardisation through TEQSA have not generated any conflict with the current threshold requirements of the property profession's accrediting bodies and it is anticipated that universities will continue to be able to offer additional units/subjects that fit their vision and policies as well as to retain product differentiation through diverse subject offerings, modes of delivery and institutionally diverse curriculum development options. The mooted extent of standardisation is still under development and TEQSA will consult with established providers. The current, professionally-based, accreditation of property degrees provides a standard of minimum requirements most particularly in the province of knowledge fields with a high degree of specialisation which must be attained by property graduates and by requirements of the provider institutions to ensure quality as defined by the benchmarks established and scrutinized by the profession.

This study has found that there is variety across the universities in Queensland which offer property degrees in respect of non-specialised knowledge fields. Many property programs have to squeeze their specialised property subjects to accommodate more generic units in both the first year and final years of study. The first year units continue to provide good transition into university education and the final year units support student transition out to the professional world. The rich diversity of generic subjects characterises individual universities within an overall integrating framework as defined by professional accreditation modules and interpreted by each university's culture. Finally, the findings in this paper are based on the assumption that TEQSA will take consideration of current accreditation and quality assurance systems. It is apparent that further research on implementation of TEQSA in property course will need to be conducted once the details of the framework have been operationalised.

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