

Built Environment Professional Bodies and Student Members: The Australian Employers Perspective.

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Key words: Australia, built environmental professional bodies, employers, students, graduates.

SUMMARY

A new generation of members are needed for professional bodies in the built environment and surveying in order to survive and thrive in the 21st century. Wilkinson and Zillante (2007) identified issues of under recruitment and an ageing membership in the Building Surveying profession in Australia; however other built environment professional bodies globally are experiencing similar issues. Not only do professional bodies need to recruit student members into the profession during their studies but they need to convert these student members to full 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 second stage of this research examined the perceptions of Australian employers of surveying, property and construction students and graduates and membership of professional bodies. The research sought to identify what measures are currently adopted in terms of encouraging professional body membership in the workplace. This paper presents the results of the employer interviews and reveals another perspective of the critical issue for professional institutions globally.

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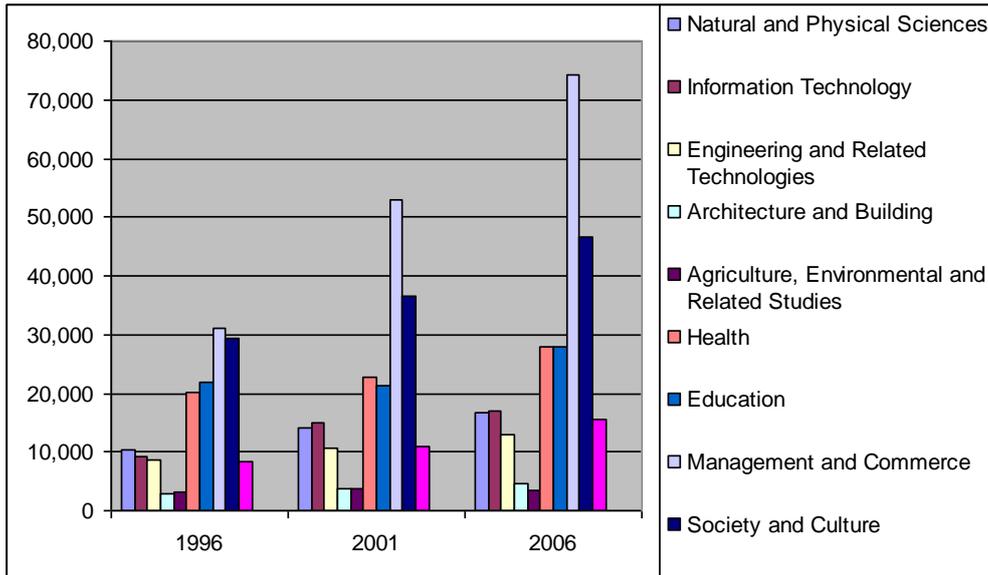
INTRODUCTION

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 and 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). This paper seeks to illustrate some of the current issues facing built environment professional bodies within Australia from the employers’ perspective.

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? Or it is because graduates are failing to become full members of the professional bodies? 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 trends in tertiary education. It is apparent that students enrolled on built environment courses, for example, construction, property, architecture, planning could fall into a number of categories. Most would be counted in the architecture and building category, but some may also appear in figures for Management & Commerce or even Engineering and related technologies, therefore we must treat these statistics with some degree of caution.

Shows that Architecture and Building is a consistently small group, 1.9% of all students, (along with Agriculture, Environmental and Related Studies, 1.5% of all students) within all the fields of study, though an increase in Architecture and Building student numbers is apparent. The highest growth is in the Management and Commerce category. All fields of study show increases but the smallest are Architecture and Building and Agriculture, Environmental and Related Studies.

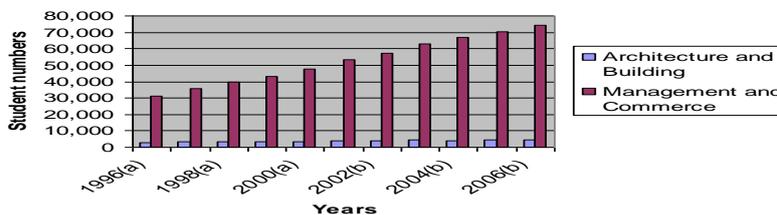
Figure 1 Total numbers of students enrolled on HE courses in Australia 1996, 2001 & 2006



Source: adapted from DEST 2006

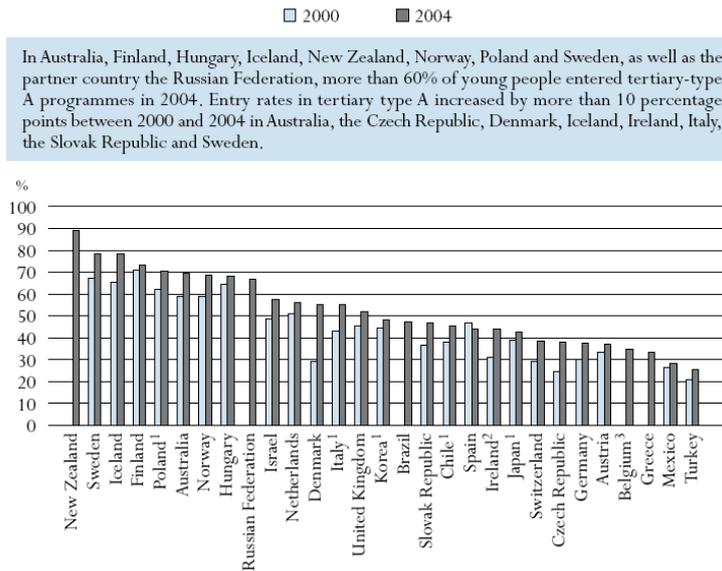
When we look more closely at the graduate completions data, Figure 2 illustrates the difference in trends for two fields of study namely; Architecture & Building and Management & Commerce courses in Australia from 1996 to 2006. Student numbers have gone from 31,078 in 1996 to 74,163 in 2006 for Management & Commerce and from 2,906 to 4,643 for Architecture & Building in the same period. Clearly students are not choosing built environment courses as much as other options. 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 greatly expanded access to tertiary education over the last decade. The recent OECD (2006) report shows this global upward trend in tertiary education as shown in

Figure 3 Entry rates into tertiary education 2000 & 2004



Source: OECD 2006

This increase in tertiary education has been partly achieved by increasing the numbers of home students studying at tertiary level and also by expanding the numbers of international or overseas students studying in Australia. So whilst total student numbers have increased for Architecture and Building studies between 1996 and 2006 the totals haven't kept up with increases in other fields of study and this is a concern for the built environment professions, especially when set against the context of high levels of construction and property activity in the economy during this period – in short we are facing a skills shortage across the built environment which 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 the entry standards are declining, in Queensland for example school level, Overall Position (OP) cut off scores have declined from a high of OP5 in 2006 to OP12 in 2008 and with some institutions offering property and construction courses with a cut off of OP18 (QTAC 2008)

Given the increased total numbers of students and the concerns over decreasing member numbers and the increasing age profile within the built environment professionals bodies (Zillante, 2007)(Elliot & Warren 2005), it appears that graduates of built environment courses are failing to become full members of the professional bodies. This begs the question: why are students failing to join built environment professional bodies on graduation? And or why are student members of built professional bodies failing to convert to full membership status? This research sought to ascertain the employers' perspectives on the current situation regarding graduates and built environment professional body membership. This is the second stage of a research project examining the issue, the first stage surveyed 661 students in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria enrolled in built environment courses and ascertained their views and perceptions with regards to profession bodies and membership. Readers are referred to Warren & Wilkinson (2008) for the results of this stage of the study.

RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This research sought to;

- a) Ascertain the views and opinions of built environment employers about the attributes of graduate and early career employees in the sector
- b) Ascertain the views and opinions of built environment employers about the attitudes of graduate and early career employees towards the built environment professions

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire survey was compiled by the Universities of Melbourne and Queensland in 2007. Adopting best practice principles in survey design as noted by Moser and Kalton, (1972) the questionnaire was piloted, then amended, prior to data collection which occurred between September and November 2007.

The survey was distributed to a target group of employers 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 participants 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, University of Queensland and 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 for 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 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.

The survey comprised three sections. Section one asked the respondent about themselves and their organisation. Questions included age group, gender, public or private sector, size of organisation, position in the organisation, services offered and their professional memberships. This data establishes the basic credentials of the employer and allows any differentiation between target sectors to be identified.

Section two of the questionnaire posed questions about the organisations graduate employees. Respondents were asked whether they had any preference for employees studying full or part time and if undergraduate or postgraduate qualifications were preferred. This section also sought to identify if employers engaged graduates that have worked or studied overseas and if so which countries did they prefer these graduates to come from if any.

The third section asked questions about the employer's preferences for graduate and professionally qualified employees. It identified the professional bodies which the employers require their employees to join and the methods used to encourage such memberships. A five point Likert scale was used to gain an understanding of what employers perceived to be their graduate employees motivations for joining a professional body. A similar Likert scale was used to ascertain what employers believed graduates should expect from a professional body. A final series of questions asked the participants whether they thought the current fee structures of the major built environment professional bodies were reasonable.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

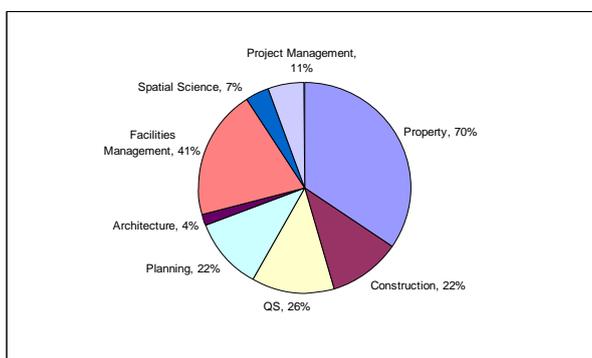
Employer background information.

The research population were comprised of;

- Employers surveyed were 76% private sector, 24% public sector
- International organisations were 52% of the respondents with 26% being national and 22% regional organisations
- All respondents were senior managers or directors of the organisation
- All respondents were male
- Most, 92% of respondents worked in large organisations with greater than 31 employees. The remainder were in organisations employing between 11 to 30 people.

The area within which the organisation practices or offers its services to the public was identified and most organisations offered several areas of expertise shown in Figure 4. The largest proportion of respondents operated in the property field, with 70%. The second largest group was Quantity Surveying at 26% followed by construction at 22%.

Figure 4 Area of Professional Practice



The survey was targeted at the senior levels of the organisations and all respondents identified themselves as either senior managers or directors within the organisation. Professional qualifications were reported by the respondents with 11% AIQS membership, 52% API and 63% RICS membership – note that some respondents were members of more than one

professional body. Other professional qualifications identified included RAIA, FMA, MIAMA and MCiArb

Employers' preferences for graduate and student employees

The employers reported that they had no clear preference for the mode of study for their employees. 10% identified fulltime study as the preferred mode of study for employees, 43% preferred part time study and 48% accepted employees studying either part or full time.

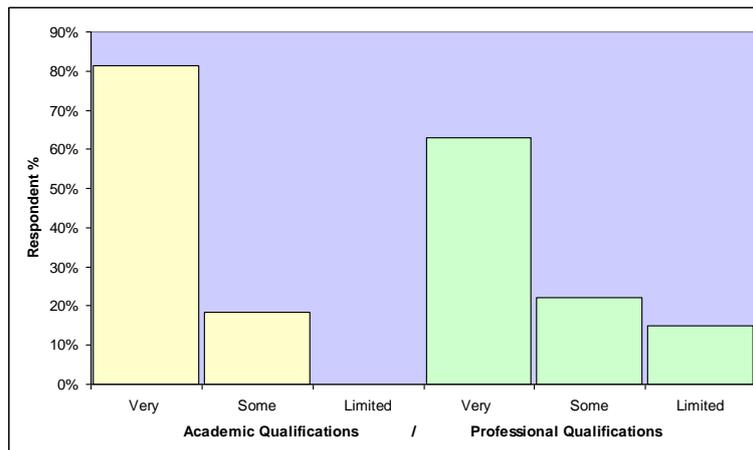
The degree which employees were studying did not have a very significant bearing on their employment, and respondents with one exception equally employ undergraduate and postgraduate degree holders. One respondent indicated a preference for postgraduate qualifications.

Employers were asked if they employed overseas graduates, and if so, whether they had a preferred country they recruited from. 78% employed overseas graduates, and of those 48% preferred UK graduates. 11% cited New Zealand as a preferred source, while Qatar and South Africa were also identified by individual respondents. The remaining respondents had no preferred country from which to recruit. The employers who did not employ overseas graduates largely attributed this to the fact that they had not received applications from overseas and had no bias one way or the other.

Graduate employee attributes

The first two questions sought to identify if the employers considered academic and professional body qualifications as important. The results are shown in , 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 felt academic qualifications were 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 academic qualifications are held in higher regard by employers than professional qualifications, however two thirds of employers think professional qualifications are very important.

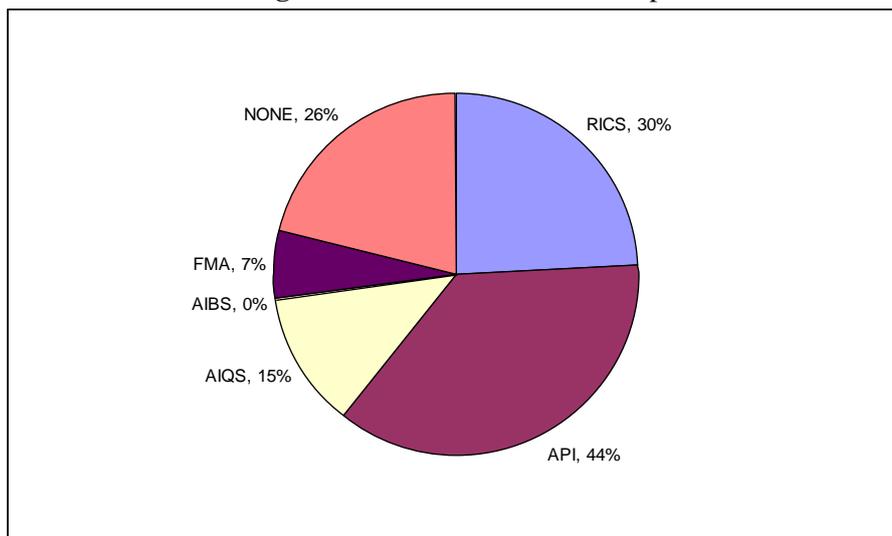
Figure 5 Academic and Professional Qualifications



Professional body memberships required of employees

Respondents identified the professional organisations they require graduate employees to become members of. The questionnaire offered respondents the choice of the four major institutions in the Australian market along with the ability to nominate other institutions. The results in show 45% of respondents expected their graduate employees to join the API while 30% RICS membership, 15% AIQS membership and 7% FMA membership.

Figure 6 Professional Membership



26% do not require any professional body membership. This distribution is to be expected given the background of the firms included in the survey but shows that a large minority do not require professional qualifications from employees. The 26% that did not require any professional body membership, included all of the 16% who stated professional qualifications were of limited importance. The remainder of the 26% were all drawn from those that ranked

professional bodies as only of some importance. Respondents were able to select multiple professional bodies and this was popular with a first preference for Australian professional body membership.

Encouraging Professional Membership

Employers were asked how they encourage professional body membership. The question provided four tick box options which were at; interview, induction, annual review and in mentoring sessions. The results revealed that most used a mixture of methods but the most popular (at 52%), was at interview, followed by mentoring and review (both at 41%) and finally 7% at induction.

Reasons for joining a professional body

Employers were asked to rank on a 5 point likert scale the different reasons why they felt graduate employees should join a professional body. Table 1 reveals the results. The most important reason is that employers feel that professional body membership is a benchmark of an employees professional knowledge and skills, followed closely by the ability to keep up to date with new practice and knowledge and thirdly to provide access to professional networks.

Employer’s reasons for professional body membership favoured those aspects of professional membership that enhance skills and knowledge within employees. The mid ranked items related to areas of employability and career advancement while the lower ranked preferences related to pay and employee benefits. This finding reinforces a belief that professional body membership does not translate into increased remuneration, in the eyes of the employers.

Table 1 Why employees should join a professional institution

Question Response	Mean Score	Rank
As a benchmark of professional knowledge and skills	4.00	1
To keep up to date with new practice and knowledge	3.78	2
To access to professional networks	3.74	3
Enhances career prospects	3.44	4
Increases employability in countries outside Australia	3.59	5
To access to continuing education	3.41	6
Increases job promotion opportunities	3.41	6
Increases employability in Australia	3.33	8
Improves salary	2.89	9
Improves benefits provided by employers	2.41	10

Employers then ranked what they perceived to be their graduate employees expectations of professional body membership. The results in Table 2, show two items equally ranked; networking opportunities and structured training. This result reinforces the answers to the previous question where training of new employees was seen as the most important aspect of

their membership of a professional body. Last on the list was salary, employers do not link professional memberships with enhanced earning capacity.

Table 2 Employers perception of students expectations

Question Response	Mean Score	Rank
Networking opportunities	4.11	1
Structured training	4.11	1
Access to `state of the art' knowledge and latest developments	4.04	3
Career development and mentoring	3.81	4
Enhanced salary from employer	2.78	5

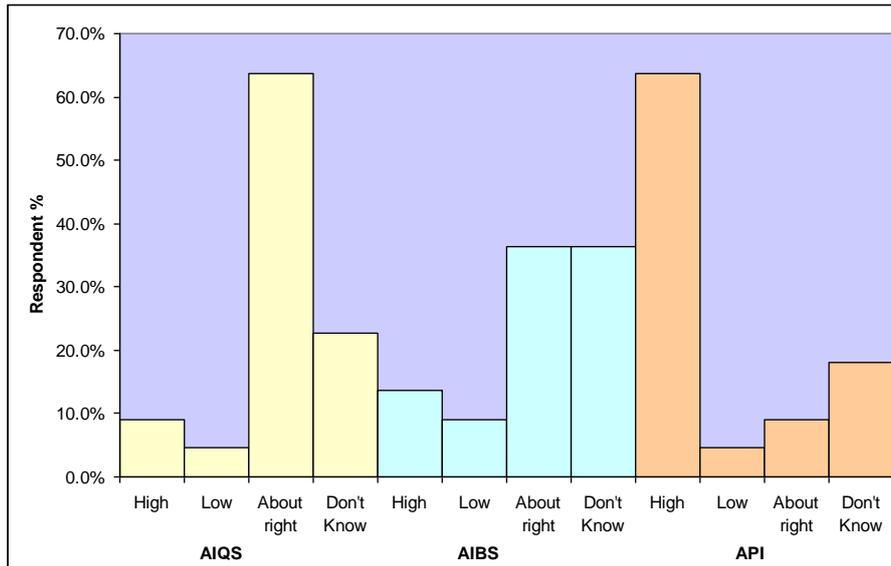
Professional Membership and Fees

The final part of the survey addressed issues relating to the payment of fees and the appropriateness of current fee structures of the leading professional institutions. Respondents were asked if they required graduate employees to become members of the professional bodies. Whilst 52% said that they did, 48% did not require membership and left the decision to the employee.

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. 81.8% of firms surveyed did pay employees professional fees, with 22.2% paying for a single membership. Though 63% of organisations will pay for multiple memberships, this finding is not, reflected in the membership base of the managers surveyed which showed 41% held joint memberships of two or more of the professional institutions within Australia.

The level of fees charged by professional institutions could be considered a barrier to young professionals joining professional institutions and employers were asked about fee levels. For example, the current fee charged by RICS for trainee membership, AUD166 per annum and a one off fee of AUD200 to sit the assessment of professional competence (APC) test, was reasonable. 72.7% felt that the fee level was 'about right'; while 13.6% of respondents felt the fee was too low. Employers did not consider the current fee levels unreasonable or a barrier to membership. Employers opinions of Australian professional bodies fees for student entry to the profession are shown in Figure 7. The respondents have a similar opinion of AIQS and AIBS fees to those held about RICS fees. This is to be expected as the level fees for these two institutions are broadly similar to that of RICS.

Figure 7 Student entry fees to professional bodies



The exception was the response to the API fee structure where 63% felt that the API (Victoria) fee scale of \$600 per annum plus a \$154 application fee for associate membership was too high. It is not possible from the data collected to determine at what level employers feel the fees are no longer 'about right' however it is evidently that the level would lie somewhere between the AIQS, AIBS, RICS and the API Victoria fee. It should be noted that API does levy different fee levels across the different Australian states and Victoria is one of the highest.

A follow up question was posed to employers seeking their opinion as to employee attitudes to the fee level if instead of self funding membership, their employer paid the fees. The results supports the expected result that, 81.9% of respondents felt that graduate employees attitude to the fee level would change or probably change if the employer paid the fees.

Timescales for membership of professional bodies

There has been some discussion that training periods may be too long for graduate employees. Some professional institutions have considered altering their training structure to reduce the period required before becoming a full member of the institution. As an example, respondents were asked if they thought the current two year RICS APC and interview process was too difficult or too long. 85.7%, feel the current APC length is appropriate, however, 9.5% felt the training period was too long.

CONCLUSIONS

The survey provided a good insight into the attitudes of key property industry employers drawn from three major Australian cities and represented the private and public sectors. While the number of respondents was not large they represented many large national and

international employers and are considered broadly representative of the property industry in Australia.

Employers did not have preference for undergraduate or postgraduate employees. This is important given the increasing number of non-cognate degree holders undertaking postgraduate study as a means of career conversion. There are opportunities for overseas trained professionals to find employment in Australia, particularly graduates from the UK and New Zealand. This is not surprising given the high vacancy level in the market and the similarity of the Australian, UK and NZ property markets. Employers believe that academic qualifications are very important and this finding reinforces the need for professional bodies to work closely with tertiary institutions to ensure access to the next generation of built environment professionals. The need for professional qualifications and membership of professional bodies is strongly supported by employers.

The finding that employers value professional qualifications is only partially reflected in a requirement of graduate employees to join a professional institution. Only 52% require membership of a professional body. There are a range of methods used by employers to encourage membership of professional bodies, the most frequently cited was at interview. Mentoring and annual review were also frequently used.

The employer's attitudes to why graduates should join a professional body revealed that issues relating to training and networking were the most important and that career advancement and salary were of least importance. 81.8% of employers pay for professional institution membership and 63% pay for more than one membership.

The survey targeted senior managers in leading national and international organizations both public and private sector. All respondents were male and over 35 years of age. 52% were API members, 11% AIQS members and 63% RICS members. Those with RICS membership all also held membership of either the API or AIQS depending on their field of practice.

Further study

Clearly professional body membership is an issue which is affecting a number of professional bodies within the built environment and surveying. This research, along with the previous student study reveals the current situation facing Australia. One of the questions arising from the findings is what is the situation in other countries? What is the position in the developing nations? Does Europe face a different set of issues? The findings of the two Australian studies show the picture for construction and property disciplines within surveying but not other disciplines such as land surveying. This project is to be extended to incorporate the wider surveying disciplines across developing and developed countries and also three European countries and an African country to ascertain the situation there and to undertake a comparative study.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Sara J Wilkinson

Sara joined the University of Melbourne in January 2005 from Sheffield Hallam University in the UK. She is a Chartered Building Surveyor and a Fellow of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS). Sara completed an MPhil at the University of Salford in 1995 examining conceptual understanding of green buildings within the UK construction industry and in 2002 she was awarded an MA in Social Science Research Methods. She has published over 80 conference and journal papers and has written books on sustainability, construction and property development. Her research interests include environmental issues and sustainability in the built environment. Sara is a member of the editorial boards of Structural Survey journal and the International Journal of Housing Markets and Analysis. She is Vice Chair Commission 10 Construction Management Construction Economics of FIG (International Federation of Surveyors). She is currently completing a PhD in modeling adaptive reuse potential in existing buildings at Deakin University.

Dr Clive Warren

Clive has over twenty years experience in the property industry working in a number of geographical locations and in a range of professional areas. He began his property career as a valuer in London before moving to Cornwall to work as a valuer and corporate real estate manager within both the private and public sectors of the UK.

In 1990 Clive migrated with his family to Brisbane where he became portfolio manager of the Commonwealth's commercial property estate. He also completed a Masters Degree in Project Management at QUT and began lecturing in real estate and asset management at both QUT and University of Queensland. In 1996 he joined the Reserve Bank of Australia, managing the Banks Queensland facilities.

In 2001 Clive left the Reserve Bank to undertake research in facilities management and to become head of the University of New South Wales Masters programme in Real Estate and Facilities Management as well as lecturing in the construction management undergraduate programme in areas of development management and ethics. In 2004 he moved to the University of Queensland to run the property economics and project management courses offered at both undergraduate and masters levels. He has a PhD in property service procurement.

Clive is a Fellow of the RICS and represents the Oceania region on the FM Faculty Board. He is a Fellow of the Australian Institute of Project Managers and is also an associate of the Australian Property Institute. .

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