

Who Should Teach What? Perceptions of the Roles of Universities and Practice in the Education of Professional Accountants

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Abstract

Universities have traditionally been criticised for not producing 'work ready' accountants and the role and responsibilities of universities in educating professional accountants continues to be debated. This paper reviews the literature in accounting and other professions regarding the respective roles of universities and employers in the development of both technical and non-technical skills of accounting practitioners. The literature review suggests that critics of university based education fail to recognise (a) the changes that have occurred in the roles and responsibilities of accounting practitioners and (b) the opportunity costs necessarily associated with providing generalist accounting degrees. The literature also suggests that universities and employers have comparative advantages for the development of different types of professional skills and knowledge. The paper reports the insights provided from a series of interviews with accounting practitioners and students about their perceptions of the respective responsibilities and roles of universities and employers. In general, although some interviewees recognised that universities cannot be 'all things to all people', there was a tendency to expect universities to have the major responsibility for the development in accounting graduates of both technical and non-technical knowledge and skills. Such perceptions tended to understate the responsibilities and comparative advantage of employers and result in unrealistic expectations about the outcomes of a university education. Employers need to be made more aware of the resource and other limitations associated with university programs and more attention should be provided to developing meaningful opportunities for learning and reflection within work place contexts.

Introduction

The issue of whether universities prepare 'work ready' accounting practitioners is at least as old in Australia as the introduction of the requirement for degree entry into the profession in 1965.¹ More recently empirical evidence (Business council of Australia, 2006; Business Industry and Higher Education Collaboration Council, 2007) reveals ongoing industry concerns with the lack of skills development in the modern business graduate. The complaint that universities produce students who are 'too theoretical' is not limited to accounting and occurs across all the professional disciplines (Mulgan, 1986, p. 108):

“Many employers ... are suspicious of what they call 'academic theory' and place great faith in the value of practical skill. They expect the universities to turn out skilled and experienced graduates, capable of immediately acting as fully-fledged professionals, and with minds uncluttered with general or theoretical ideas. Any time that has to be spent later on practical on-the-job training is held as a cost which the employer should not have to bear and as evidence of the university's failure to provide the right professional education.”

The debate about what 'should' be the objectives of a university based accounting education continues to be of interest (see, for example, Wilson et al. (2009)). In more recent times the catalyst for this discussion is the recognition that the nature of the work of accounting practitioners is changing significantly (see, for example, Howieson (2003); Thomson (2009)) but, it is alleged, the pedagogy of accounting university education has not followed suit (for example, Albrecht and Sack (2000); Kavanagh & Drennan (2008)).

Fundamentally, this debate is a question concerned with identifying that point at which the educational responsibilities of universities finish and those of the professional bodies and employers begin. As discussed below, this is a complex issue reflecting many factors including the perceived objectives of a university degree, the availability of resources, the diverse characteristics of employers, and even the expectations of students. Nonetheless, a review of this question is

¹ Linn (1996, particularly Chapter 5) documents the introduction of the degree entry requirement by the Australian accounting profession. Histories of accounting education in the U.S. can be found in Langenderfer (1987) and Schlosser et al. (1987).

necessary if the calls for reform in accounting education² are going to lead to effective outcomes. In addition, such a review is important in defining 'professionalism' in accounting practice and whereas the attention is usually focused upon universities, there is also the opportunity to reflect upon the role and responsibilities of employers in the development of accounting practitioners. It is also timely given the move to define minimum academic standards for Australian degrees under the Australian Quality Framework (Matchett, 2010)

This paper seeks to contribute to the debate by first reviewing literature related to the respective roles of universities and employers in accounting and other professional education and, second, provides recent evidence from a range of employers and graduates as to their perceptions and beliefs about this matter. Unlike prior papers, the results reported here provide direct evidence from the experience of those 'at the coal face'. The next section of the paper briefly reviews relevant literature across three related topics – first, how has accounting practice changed in recent years and what are the implications of these changes for the skill sets of practitioners; second, what are important constituent components and processes in the development³ of accounting practitioners; and third, for which of these components and processes do universities and employers have a respective comparative advantage? Following this review, we report the results of a series of interviews which sought to gather evidence on practitioners' and recent graduates' perspectives about the relative roles of universities and employers in the education and training of accounting practitioners. Finally, the findings are discussed and some conclusions are provided.

Literature

What do Accounting Graduates and Practitioners Need to Know and Do?

² For example, at the time of writing the Australian Federal Government was considering plans "for codified course attributes and graduate outcomes across all areas of post-school study" as part of its Australian Qualifications Framework. The accounting discipline is likely to be one of the first to be considered for these new standards (Matchett, 2010, p. 30).

³ We have purposely used the term 'development' at this stage of the paper rather than 'education' as part of the debate is about whether accountants should be 'educated' or whether they should be 'trained'.

Although change is a constant in modern business, there has been some interest in recent times to explore the implications of that change for accounting practice and education. For example, in one review of this matter, Howieson (2003) has noted how forces such as globalisation and advances in technology have eroded the more traditional record-keeping and compliance roles of accountants and promoted their role to that of 'knowledge worker', decision maker, and business advisor. Of course, technical knowledge and 'practical' skills remain vital but rather than merely acting as reporters of accounting information, accountants have increasingly acted as interpreters and advisors of that information. The changing role of Chief Financial Officers (CFOs) has often been used as a key example of this change. Spanyol (2006) suggests that CFOs must move beyond the traditional mindset and look beyond the numbers to lead in strategy and operation. This is supported by Thomson (2009, p. 13), who states that CFOs have moved "from counters of the beans to sprouters of the beans"! A consequence of this evolving role is a call for a change in the skill set of accountants that reduces the traditional preoccupation with bookkeeping, tax, and audit rules and procedures (so-called 'technical' skills) and increases the desire to acquire various 'soft-skills' including improved communication abilities, leadership skills, critical thinking and problem-solving (the so-called 'generic' or 'non-technical' skills). Can, and should, all these skills be taught at universities or is there a role for employers and professional bodies in the development of accounting graduates and practitioners?

Development of the Accounting Practitioner

Perceptions about the respective roles of academe and practice in the development of practitioners revolve in part around one's conception of the accountant as either a 'professional' or a 'technician'; a corollary of this conception is whether an accountant needs an 'education' or 'training'. Such conceptions vary in practice but are driven, at least in part, by the extent to which one embraces the types of environmental and workplace changes noted earlier in this paper. As noted by Watson (2006, p. 624), those who criticise modern educational approaches "are seeing the past through the

inevitable 'rose coloured spectacles' ... [and fail to recognise] that things have changed considerably from the 'good old days'." A traditional characterisation would emphasise the importance of experience and training 'on the job' that fits well with a history of accounting practice grounded in bookkeeping and compliance type work. This view would see practitioner development as a process of training that emphasises command over rules and the performance of routine tasks. A more modern characterisation recognises that the move to an advisory type role will require more ability to deal with uncertainty and problem solving in addition to sound technical knowledge. This view would see practitioner development as a process of education⁴ that tends to emphasise a 'learning to learn' and a focus on long term practitioner needs. This tension in perspectives is common in all disciplines that seek to transform themselves to a profession. For example, Barnett et al. (1987) document the changes in professional preparation across the pharmacy, nursing, and teaching disciplines and note how the adoption of degree level qualifications as an entry point becomes a necessary trapping of the mantle of 'profession'. Nursing, for example, has strived towards being recognised as an equal among other health professions with an increase in its status being accompanied in recent years by the development of nursing degrees.⁵

Wu and Chien (2004) find that budget insufficiency at universities and the lack of interaction between educators and the practice community appear to be the main reasons why accounting education may not meet the future needs of students. In an article titled "Bridging the Gap Between Professors and Practitioners", Krause (2005, p. 69) emphasised the importance of case studies to establish a connection between professors and practitioners "cases based on practitioner input can generate benefits by applying contextual experience to theory in a way that promotes more than 'for the exam' learning". He goes on to say that without the initial input from accounting

⁴ "Education is a higher word [than training]; it implies an action upon our mental nature, and the formation of character" (Norman quoted in Watson (2006, p. 63)).

⁵ Barnett et al. (1987, p. 59) do note at least one negative to the introduction of degree based professional entry which is the risk that the desire for legitimacy in universities results in "the separateness of the academic and the professional communities" so that each does not interact with, nor inform, the other.

practitioners , whether in the form of cases or other personal interventions, such professional awareness will not happen in the college environment. Kerby et al. (2009) suggest that a way forward to overcome the significant shortage of accounting academics is to encourage accounting firms to consider encouraging part-time teaching to support a collegiate accounting program and contribute to the profession. Professionally qualified teaching staff offer a number of benefits or advantages to accounting programs and students including practice-based, real-world experience, a network of contacts for students and faculty, and flexibility in staffing.

As elaborated below, the development of accounting professionals requires a combination of both conceptual skills and practical experience⁶; each on its own is not enough:

“experience provides only the *opportunity* for development to take place; the individual must extract the lessons from the experience before development can occur” (Robinson and Wick, 1992, p. 64, emphasis in original).

Professionalism also involves more than sound technical skills. There seems common agreement in the literature that one of the attributes that distinguishes a professional from a technician is what Zeff (1989) refers to as ‘intellect’ – an abstract idea that reflects characteristics including the ability to reflect upon and critique one’s experiences and knowledge along with an understanding of the broader environment and context in which one conducts one’s practice. The cultivation of an accountant’s intellect is important, *inter alia*, for challenging and improving accounting practice (Zeff, 1989) and for promoting accountability, a hallmark of a profession (Watson, 2006). Graham (2002, p. 40) observes that “people can master practical techniques while being quite unable to ‘give an account’ of them”.

Wilson et al. (2009, p. 151) suggest that the effective development of professional accountants requires the structured and planned integration of university education, pre-qualifying professional training, and continuing professional development (post-qualifying). They point to a distinction

⁶ Also see IAESB (2003; 2009) and Velayutham and Perera (2009).

made by the International Accounting Education Standards Board (IAESB, 2009) between ‘capability’ and ‘competence’. The IAESB (2009) emphasises the acquisition of competence which is defined as (IAESB, 2009, para. 12):

“the ability to perform a work role to a defined standard with reference to working environments. To demonstrate competence in a role, a professional accountant must possess the necessary (a) professional knowledge, (b) professional skills, and (c) professional values, ethics, and attitudes.”

Less attention is given by the IAESB (2009) to capabilities which are not defined other than to note that they “enable professional accountants to perform their roles competently” (IAESB, 2009, para. 28). Wilson et al. (2009, p. 151) suggest that capabilities are “the attributes held by individuals which enable them to perform their roles” (presumably an accountant could be ‘competent’ but not ‘capable’ and vice versa), a notion that would parallel Aristotle’s virtue of ‘practical wisdom’. They go on to proffer the opinion that (Wilson et al., 2009, p. 152, emphasis in original):

“One might argue that the primary focus of university education in accounting should be on *capability*, and the primary focus of professional training should be on *competence*”.

There would appear to be some support for such an opinion in the literature. The often cited Accounting Education Change Commission in the United States argued that:

“the accounting program focus should be on preparing students to *become* professional accountants, not *be* professional accountants at the time of entry to the profession. New hires cannot be expected to have the range of knowledge and skills of their more experienced colleagues” (Williams, 1993, p. 77, emphasis in original).

An emphasis on the development of capabilities is seen as an essential role of a university education (Mulgan, 1986, p. 108):

“professional degrees, if they are to serve the real interests of their respective professions, quite apart from any broader educational purpose, must make sure that they are academic in orientation, concentrating on the central intellectual principles and problems of their discipline ... [the] aim must be to equip [graduates] to be effective as eventual leaders of their professions.”

It is argued that universities should teach students 'how to learn' (Williams, 1993) and how to extract knowledge and wisdom by serious 'reflection' about the experiences they will have in practice (Velayutham and Perera, 2009). Universities, it is suggested, should not "give too much time to imparting the detailed information and to developing the practical skills which the professional practitioner will need to practise his or her profession" (Mulgan, 1986, p. 108). One of the dangers of professional training that emphasises the acquisition of competences and 'transferable skills' over capabilities is that such an approach promotes an intellectual paralysis that undermines the very qualities we expect of professionalism; that is, autonomy, accountability, innovation, and self-evaluation (Watson, 2006).

Do Universities and Employers Have Comparative Advantages in Professional Development?

Julius Caesar said that "experience is the teacher of all things", a view often shared by some practitioners. All Australian universities take their own independent positions on preparing students and graduates for the world of work and their employability (Smith, et al., 2009). However, most may actually view employability skills as lower-order skills that are subsumed by higher order graduate attributes. Robinson and Wick (1992) state that research suggests that approximately 70% of managers' development occurs through work place experiences. Crebert et al. (2004) add support to the argument finding that while graduates "recognised the contribution university had made to their skills' development, they greatly valued the experience of learning in the workplace during placement and in employment" (p.147) and they emphasised stronger linkage between curriculum content at university and 'real world' applications in practice. However, the discussion above suggests that academe and practice have complementary roles to play in the development of effective professional accounting practitioners. What should these roles be?

In a recent analysis of law schools and the legal profession (which, like the accounting profession, is service based), Woronoff (2009) argues that universities and practitioners enjoy respective

comparative advantages in the development of professional practitioners;⁷ these comparative advantages are often not recognised or are misunderstood. As a starting point for his analysis, Woronoff (2009, pp. 3 – 4) suggests that the training of professionals⁸ relates to three sets of knowledge which reflect the ‘competences’ and ‘capabilities’ of professional practice noted previously:

- ‘substantive knowledge’ – this relates to knowledge of accounting and auditing standards, taxation laws and so on;
- ‘practical skills’ – there are two sub-sets.
 - The first is the ability to perform necessary tasks in accounting practice (e.g., preparation of financial statements and taxation returns; conduct of audits).
 - The second is “an understanding of the context of practice” (e.g., what is the rationale for accounting policy choices and how do those choices impact upon an entity’s activities).
- “Expertise” – the ability to effectively and efficiently structure knowledge and the ability to contextualise the use of knowledge based upon learning from prior experience.

Woronoff (2009) argues that both academics and practitioners need to be realistic about what can be achieved in the limited time and resources available in a typical undergraduate degree. Rather, the two parties should identify which of them has a comparative advantage in educating graduates in the different categories of knowledge that Woronoff has identified.

With regard to ‘substantive knowledge’ he suggests that this is best taught at universities where, relatively speaking, more time is available than in practice for working through the extensive and complex technical rules. However, he notes that despite this advantage, from his personal perspective, the tendency for undergraduate degrees to address a range of topics rather than specialise in a few, often means that students have not got sufficient substantive knowledge for practice in any specific discipline within their profession.

⁷ A similar point is noted by Barnett et al. (1987) in the context of other professions.

⁸ Woronoff’s (2009) comments are in the context of legal practitioners but the similar nature of the services offered between legal and accounting practitioners allows for useful comparisons here.

In the context of teaching 'expertise' Woronoff (2009) believes that this necessarily must occur within practice and cannot be taught in universities. There are various reasons for this – many faculty members at universities are professional academics rather than practitioners and so may not have the necessary levels of practical experience; learning by doing takes time and variation in contexts, neither of which is available within conventional degree structures (even if taught by persons with sufficient experience); and as graduates could work in an infinite variety of fact situations and organisations, university settings cannot help but be too artificial and abstractions from 'real world' conditions. Graduates require opportunities for meaningful mentoring in the work place. Similarly to Woronoff (2009), Velayathum and Perera (2009) have argued that universities and pre-qualifying professional training have both failed on the grounds of emphasising and assessing technical competences rather than capabilities. They recommend that pre-qualifying professional training should incorporate Schön's (1983, 1987) concept of a 'reflective practicum' (the meaningful analysis and evaluation of one's response to practical situations) and that assessment by professional bodies should be on evaluating the skills learned from work place experience rather than primarily technical knowledge.

Finally, with regard to teaching practical skills, Woronoff (2009) argues that universities have a comparative advantage for both the teaching of tasks and context. Although both of these skills draw upon substantive knowledge and expertise, universities offer the ability to practice tasks within courses and take a perspective wider than the immediate commercial concerns of a particular professional firm. Nevertheless, Woronoff (2009) believes that, first, there are insufficient resources to adequately practice all practical tasks and, second, exposing students to broader context diverts attention away from the core professional discipline. Opportunity costs are important here, particularly in the context of the teaching of practical tasks where Woronoff (2009) notes that critics of universities unfairly ignore the fact that limited resources mean that trade-offs must necessarily

be made in what can be taught. To argue that task X should be taught at university, typically means that some other task can no longer be taught.

In summary, Woronoff's (2009) analysis is helpful in making explicit the recognition that although a university education has the potential to offer value to future practitioners, there needs to be an understanding and acceptance of the limits imposed by resources and the nature of expertise. In keeping with Wilson et al. (2009) and, as Velayutham and Perera (2009) suggest, a more integrated approach to the development and education of accounting practitioners is needed between universities, employers, and professional accounting bodies to leverage off the developmental comparative advantages of the respective parties.

The literature reviewed here offers mixed messages about the respective roles of universities and practice in the development of professional accountants. Although there is a tendency to view the role of universities as providing graduates with life-long learning skills, there is also a preoccupation with developing their substantive technical knowledge as well. Jackson (2009) argues that it is important to effectively extract the opinions of those supervising and working alongside recent business graduates on the competencies that will maximise their performance in the workplace. Employers offer the potential to provide on-the-job training to develop expertise but this is not necessarily being delivered if insufficient time is available in the work place for graduates to meaningfully reflect upon the lessons implicit in that experience. Of course, whether educators wish to embrace industry opinion on course design and content is another question (Jackson, 2009).

In interviews conducted with academics, university administrators, and practitioners in the disciplines of pharmacy, nursing, and teaching, Barnett et al. (1987) found diverse views amongst these groups about the respective roles and relationships between academics and practitioners across these disciplines. Research by Watty (reported in Wilson et al., 2009, p. 162) reported interviews conducted with seven Australian Heads of Accounting Departments (HoDs) and

representatives of the three Australian professional accounting bodies to explore their perceptions of their respective roles in the development of accounting practitioners. There was a lack of consistency in the views of HoDs and professional bodies (both within and between each group) about their roles in education – these ranged from seeing the role as one of ‘training’ while others saw the objective as being one of developing business leaders and strategic thinkers. A survey of Australian accounting academics by Watty (2006) further indicated that the academics on average believed that the objectives they sought for their students were not achieved anyway because of the constraints imposed by their working environment. Kavanagh and Drennan (2007) supported this finding that academics did not believe that they were able to deliver the skills they considered to be important to graduates. This lack of agreement about the roles of universities and employers is a matter of concern (Wilson et al., 2009, p. 163):

“where there is a lack of consistency about the primary role of accounting educators, the profession and indeed graduate employers, there is a potential for overlap and gaps to emerge in the learning or development of professional accountants. This is to say that these key stakeholders should not operate in isolation.”

Consequently, we were interested to gather the views of practitioners, recent graduates, and current students as to what they viewed, on the basis of their experience, as the appropriate roles for universities and employers. The views of this group have been underrepresented in the literature which has tended to focus on universities and academics and, to a lesser extent, the professional accounting bodies. Although an important constituent, the latter entities are bound to represent a more macro view of the issues. The next sections report and discuss interviews conducted with employers and recent graduates.

Sample, Data, and Method

This paper reports a sub-sample of the findings of a much larger study that investigated perceptions about the skills set required for accounting practice (Hancock et al., 2009). Data were collected for this study by conducting interviews across a range of different environments. As shown in Tables 1

and 2, interviews were conducted with 47 individuals drawn from employers from Big 4, mid-tier and small accounting firms in both metropolitan and regional areas, in small and large companies, the public sector, professional accounting bodies, current students and graduates.

	Number
Big 4 accounting firms	4
Mid-tier/niche accounting firms	5
Corporations	8
Public Sector	4
Professional bodies	3
Other employers	8
Recent graduates	10
Current students	5
TOTAL	47

Table 1: Categories of Interviewees

	Metropolitan	Regional	Total
Employers	21	8	29
Professional bodies	3	0	3
Recent graduates	7	3	10
Current students	3	2	5
TOTAL	34	13	47

Table 2: Metropolitan/Regional Composition of Interviewees

Interview questions were tailored to suit the particular category of interviewee but in general covered a range of matters associated with, *inter alia*, demographic information, training opportunities, perceived skill sets, and the implications of the nature of accounting work and career development over time for perceived skill sets. With regard to the present paper, specific interview questions explored the perceived role of universities and employers in the development of both technical skills (equivalent to Woronoff's (2009) categories of substantive knowledge and practical tasks) and non-technical ('generic') skills (equivalent to Woronoff's (2009) categories of contextual knowledge and 'expertise') for accountants. These perceptions were couched in the context of the

particular interviewee's experiences and workplace. Interviewees were encouraged to elaborate upon their answers to gain further insights into their views.

The duration of each of the interviews varied between sixty to ninety minutes, with each session conducted by a member of the research team. All discussions during interviews were taped and then transcribed (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). NVIVO was used to analyse the data and comments were quantified in order to allow analysis of the data. The definition of non-technical skills is problematic with considerable diversity in the literature as to the nomenclature and interpretation of so-called 'generic' skills but we adopted those skills and definitions used in BIHECC (2007)⁹ on the basis of their general acceptance.

Findings and Discussion

Our analysis of the comments of the interviewees is split between those relating to the responsibility for developing technical skills and those relating to non-technical skills.

Responsibility for Technical Skills

Table 3 reports the breakdown of the frequency of responses across types of technical skill and responsible entity. The table indicates that approximately 58% of the comments placed the responsibility for the acquisition of technical skills upon universities, although nearly 31% of the comments saw this as a responsibility of employers. A deeper analysis of the comments indicated that there was an overwhelming expectation that the universities would concentrate on the development of basic practical accounting skills such as bookkeeping.

⁹ The non-technical skills adopted here were communication and presentation skills; initiative and enterprise; planning and organisation; problem solving; self-management; teamwork, good interpersonal skills, degree of fit into the organisational ethos; and technological competence.

	Number
Employer's role	17
Graduate aptitude, responsibility	2
University/Employer Partnership	3
TAFE model builds skills	1
University's role	32
Total	55

Table 3: Frequency of Comments About the Responsibility for Technical Skill Development

Whether employers believed that they had a role to play in developing graduates' technical skills did seem to depend upon the employers' characteristics – Big 4, metropolitan audit firms, for example, had less expectations about the technical abilities of graduates than smaller, regional accounting practices. This typically reflected the relative level of resources available to train new graduates:

The thing that I have noticed, probably because my partner is an accountant as well, and he didn't go to a big four firm and didn't get the training and stuff and I guess the main aim once you finish uni is to complete your CA and the support and training kind of helps you pass the CA was huge, whereas I think if I was doing it at a non-big four, you would struggle with the CA definitely....and you can definitely see why because without that support and I guess the force of a big four firm... If they think something is not happening right, they will go in for you and see what they can do, but if you are just in a smaller firm, no, that would be very difficult. (Recent Graduate)

As noted by one employer, universities may need to better anticipate the needs of their local employers (particularly in regional areas) and tailor their courses accordingly:

Certainly in smaller country firms, a lot of what they learn at university will never be applied in their practical work and that's where we find that TAFE does a pretty good job in teaching those technical skills, if you like, the day-to-day practicalities of accounting for small business. The university is very good at teaching at a higher level and possibly that's too high for most of our students (Employer).

Responsibility for Non-Technical Skills

Table 4 reports the breakdown of the frequency of responses across types of non-technical skill and responsible entity. Again, the great majority of comments suggest that universities are the place to develop the various non-technical skills with the exceptions of planning and organising and teamwork skills for which there is a relatively even split between responsibilities for employers and

universities. Some interviewees felt that the universities could better develop these non-technical skills by providing better opportunities for team work and by providing structured work placements:

Personally I feel that non-technical skills are a bit lacking slightly because in accounting there are less opportunities for project work in that sense (Current Student).

I think [work based learning is] a fantastic initiative because it just gives them that exposure and they are not coming in green and saying, I can do it, it is going to be like this and we are saying, well actually it is not, it is going to be like this (Employer).

	Employer's role	Graduate aptitude, responsibility	University/Employer Partnership	University's role	Total
Communication, presentation	7	2	3	16	28
Initiative and enterprise	2	4	1	11	18
Planning and organising	3	0	0	4	7
Problem solving	4	1	2	16	23
Self management	5	2	1	9	17
Teamwork, good interpersonal skills, fit organisation ethos	10	2	2	11	25
Technological competence	2	0	0	7	9

Table 4: Frequency of Comments About the Responsibility for Non-Technical Skill Development

Employers perceived one of their main contributions to the development of non-technical skills as being in the area of developing teamwork and interpersonal skills as these were important for both the management of work team performance and in client relationships. In some cases, this was as much about an organisational socialisation process as it was about developing team work skills:

Once they arrive here we will train them in our methods and the way we do things and they will progress from there. Training is ongoing as I have said (Employer).

I guess to tailor them to that particular company's circumstance and the culture that they use in their organisation (Employer).

Work places also provide an opportunity for mentoring:

Yes, and the other thing the employers did say was if they did lack a bit of technical skills they can easily teach them on the job. To them that wasn't an issue because they have got other people there that can show them the ropes or show them how it was done before, or general entry and let them have a look at it, or pull out a business report that was done

before - this is a mock of how you can do it, it is not how we want you to write it (Representative of Professional Accounting Body).

Post-Qualification

Interviewees noted that the types of skills that professional accountants required does change over time as they advance in their organisations and move from one position to another. In general, the balance shifts away from technical skills to a need to develop non-technical skills, particularly leadership and strategy, as accountants tend to move to more managerial related roles:

After that we continue to train them, but because their role is changing we actually start emphasising managerial. Even in the first couple of years we kind of pepper the courses with some managerial training, so we start off with self awareness stuff, some Myers Briggs type TMI kind of instruments, getting greater awareness of how they act and behave and the emotional intelligence. Then we try to introduce them progressively to things like negotiating skills courses and how to manage your time and so, all those kind of non-technical, but really important practical skills that they actually need to do their job (Employer).

Discussion

Although perceptions were mixed, as a generalisation there was an expectation that universities were responsible for the development of both technical and non-technical skills in the period prior to entering employment. Interviewees had little to say about the role of universities post-graduation and tended to see a role for employers in socialising graduates into the culture of an organisation to promote team work and client relationship management. For the longer term, universities may have a place in the training of accountants in leadership and strategy (e.g., via an MBA) but some of the staff that we interviewed from corporate and public sector entities indicated a lot of 'soft-skills' training occurred on an as needed, short-term in-house basis. Expectations about who was responsible for technical skills depended upon the ability of the employer to devote resources to training new graduates but, in general, expectations about the level of technical skills were limited to basic bookkeeping and the preparation of financial statements.

The heavy expectations that universities were primarily responsible for both technical and non-technical skills is reminiscent of Woronoff's (2009) observation that the critics of university accounting programs fail to recognise the opportunity costs associated with resource constrained degrees. In 1990 the Mathews report made a series of recommendations one of which was:

In the development and review of three-year undergraduate accounting courses, higher education institutions and course development and accreditation committees should look for evidence of a broad general education and the integration of communication and computing skills into the teaching and learning processes. (Recommendation 4.3, Australia. Review of the Accounting Discipline in Higher Education, 1990, p. xxiv).

To achieve this and other recommendations the Mathews report argued that students should be spending four years studying at a university before graduating with an accounting degree. Twenty years on and similar issues remain and the accounting degrees remain three years in length and other alternative pathways programs are even shorter in duration. Only one of our interviewees explicitly acknowledged the need for trade-offs:

I look there and I do laugh because I think it is even if you go down into the school environment, schools are expected to teach everything and they keep packing things into the curriculum and then universities are expected to teach everything and pack it into the curriculum. So, there is a real, I suppose, tension there about providing as much as possible in the technical skills, but also ensuring that if you want a well-rounded graduate and you want those graduate attributes, how are you going to structure the course and the teaching and the learning to develop those attributes, what's the connect between saying, well at the conclusion of having undertaken a specific degree at this university, these are the graduate attributes, but how are we ensuring that they are actually being developed and how are they being assessed? (Representative of Professional Accounting Body).

Professional accounting associations have a role to play in informing their members about the realities of expecting universities to be all things to all employers. Notwithstanding this observation, it is clear that, like much of the literature reviewed earlier, several employers saw the role of universities as being related to long-term outcomes rather than more immediate instrumentalism:

Well they should teach the basics. We do expect as I said that students who come to us with an accounting degree will know something about accounting. However as I have already said, grades are not always indicative of their knowledge and we have already talked about application of concepts. But most of these people are young and giving them a broad based education to equip them for many aspects of life should be a university's role. We can train them in the specifics of the job when they are 'on the job' (Employer).

The university's role is more generic skills (Recent Graduate).

I don't think courses that are too practically oriented serve the long term best interests of the students or even their employers. My view is that if you understand the theory as practice changes you will be able to change what you do – the theory still holds but if people come out too much trained in particular practice within an existing framework and the framework is changed and they haven't got the theory, I have problem (Employer).

I guess what they need to learn is, and at a lot of universities it is a fairly independent sort of learning, so they learn I guess to do research and to investigate themselves off their own bat and to be proactive. That depends a bit too on the individual I guess. In high school you are more led whereas in university it is a more independent sort of learning which is what they really need to be when they get out into the workplace (Employer).

Woronoff (2009) suggested that universities were well placed to deliver substantive knowledge, training in practical tasks, and provide some context to understand the implications of one's professional practice. Employers, he suggested, were best placed to deliver 'expertise' or the skills required to integrate knowledge with work place objectives. This was supported by the CIHE Report (Archer and Davidson, 2008) which suggested that employers should consider what steps they might take to better inform universities of their needs and work with them to develop even more employable graduates who can add value. As such employers might: offer skill sessions on campus; take more students on placements ; develop and even deliver business case studies that bring the issues they face in front of students and academics so as to better inform and refresh the curriculum" (p. 13). The results of our interviews would seem to confirm these general expectations, although employers clearly differ in the extent to which they believe universities actually deliver (especially in the context of technical skills). Interestingly, very few of our interviewees commented on the part of the graduates themselves to take responsibility for their own learning and professional growth. The general view was that employers "are not sure that that kind of skill can be taught at a university" but the ability of graduates to be motivated and take the initiative was viewed as an important driver of success in professional life:

I remember one employer saying that they had given this young person a task to do and, rather than [taking] initiative to say, , well look, I just don't get it, give me some more guidance or ask someone else who is in the same team. I remember coming away from that thinking that that's lacking that business confidence to even be able to say, it's OK not to know (Representative of Professional Accounting Body).

Conclusions

Our review and interviews indicate that there are diverse expectations among the academic and practitioner communities about the respective roles of universities and employers in the education and training of professional accountants. In general, the expectation would seem to be that universities should be able to develop both technical and non-technical skills to make students 'work ready' upon graduation. However, expectations about the relative level of development in all these skills did seem to depend upon the characteristics and resources of the employing organisation and some employers placed more emphasis on sound technical skills while others preferred to emphasise the development of skills that enabled graduates to cope with change and promote long-term development.

Given the infinite variety of employers and on-going change in the business environment, it is unlikely that universities will ever satisfy everyone about the attributes they instil in their accounting graduates. We suggest there needs to be more explicit recognition of this limitation on the part of professional accounting bodies and their members and more realism about what can be achieved in undergraduate degrees. On the other hand, this does not mean that universities are absolved of any responsibility to consider the needs of their students, the great majority of whom will be pursuing professional careers. As noted by Barnett et al. (1987, p. 61), but not stressed by the majority of our interviewees, there should be a more explicit and structured interrelationship between the academic and professional education of accountants:

“Both academics and practitioners have a part to play in this development of professional skills and their contributions should be complementary. While the academics should offer the theoretical framework and the knowledge base for the consolidation of professional

skills, and provide the student with the opportunity to analyse and reflect on these skills, it should be the practitioner who is principally involved in their initial development.”

We would suggest that the comparative advantage of a university accounting program that necessarily is seeking to prepare students for diverse career paths must be a return to the traditional objectives of creating critical, independent thinkers who can reflect upon their experiences and learn for the future. The place of accounting technical knowledge is to help provide a context for the application and practice of these skills, not to treat the technical knowledge as an end in itself. The rapid pace of change in accounting practice and regulation quickly makes such rule based knowledge redundant. Educators, accounting firms and professional bodies need to reassess their approach to developing accountants post-graduation. For this to occur certain conditions have to be met: (a) greater communication between parties in terms of the content and pedagogy of the learning programmes developed, (b) transfer of strategies and expertise to facilitate a structured approach to developing accountants of the future, and (c) consideration to creating a workplace environment that enables graduates to build on and transfer acquired knowledge and skills. For example, are there sufficient structured opportunities for accountants to meaningfully learn from their work place experiences?

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