

The value of the professional accreditation process in Australasia: architectural academics perceptions

Michael J. Ostwald¹, Anthony Williams¹ and Sascha Fuller¹

¹ The University of Newcastle, Australia

ABSTRACT: Accreditation is a process wherein the competency of an individual or group is determined. In Australasia, various professions accredit degree programs in a process that certifies that the graduates of such programs may be automatically accepted as possessing appropriate skills, abilities and profession specific knowledge. In Australia, different bodies representing the architectural profession accredit programs on a cycle of up to five years in length. Thus, on average four architecture schools each year are accredited in Australasia in a process that involves almost 1600 students, 80 academics and 40 panellists. Despite the numbers of students and panellists, it is the academics who undertake the work in preparation for the accreditation process and have to respond to any recommendations.

As part of an Oceania-wide benchmarking project on architecture schools, Australasian academics were asked a series of questions about a range of topics including professional accreditation. This paper reports the results of an on-line survey and a series of interviews and focus groups with more than 100 academics about their attitudes towards professional accreditation. The paper analyses and categorises the responses into a series of themes and broadly differentiates them on the basis of frequency of response and the relative value they attribute to the accreditation process.

Keywords: Architectural education, professional accreditation, academic's perceptions

INTRODUCTION

0.1 Background

Histories of the rise of the architectural profession tend to note the often-contentious relationship that exists between the academy and the profession (Freeland 1971; Kostof 1977; Gutman 1989; Cuff 1991; Clarke, 1994; Duffey and Hutton 1998). However, relatively few of these works mention the formal mechanisms that exist to mediate between the profession and the academy; these include accreditation processes, competency statements and registration examinations (Boyer and Mitgang 1996; Woods 1999). It is widely known that such mechanisms exist in most countries to control the standard of people entering a profession, but they are rarely the topic of independent research and evaluation. One of the few studies of the way in which professions and the academy interact was undertaken by the Australian Federal Government who analysed multiple professions and their processes for accreditation, credentialism, recognition and assessment (Higher Ed. Council 1996; 1997). These studies into professional accreditation systems in Australia and their operations between 1992 and 1995 found that:

- i. the relationship between professional bodies and universities varies significantly between different professions with some much more closely aligned to their university counterparts than others.
- ii. universities have historically regarded professional accreditation as an intrusion but, since the rise of heightened quality assurance expectations, now regard accreditation as one of a large number of similarly valuable processes for assessing stakeholder needs.
- iii. professional accreditation is critical for attracting overseas students to study in Australia.
- iv. professional accreditation processes have little positive impact on the quality of student work, or graduate competencies; internal quality assurance mechanisms within universities have a much greater impact.
- v. accreditation panels should not provide advice to universities on how to achieve competencies just which ones are necessary and whether or not that had been achieved.
- vi. there was a degree of confusion in documentation surrounding the difference between the expected competencies of graduates and of registered professionals.
- vii. there should be more consumer and academic involvement in the development of professional competencies and accreditation processes.

While none of these findings are specific to the architectural profession, research about the professional accreditation of architecture programs in Australasia is lacking and several of these themes are pertinent to the present project, which asks academics for their views on professional accreditation.

0.2 The Australian Context

Every year in Australasia, around 20% of architecture schools are reviewed by a National Visiting Panel (NVP) who make a determination about the capacity of each architecture program to produce graduates who can meet the required competencies of the profession. In Australia, the Architects Accreditation Council of Australia (ACA), the associated State Boards of Architects (BOAs) and the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA) manage this accreditation process; an equivalent process occurs in New Zealand using the same structures and guidelines. These bodies, the ACA and the RAIA, collectively determine the needs of the profession and visit architecture schools, typically on a five yearly cycle for a major review and on an annual basis to follow up on these results (State Visiting Panels or SVPs conduct the annual reviews). Despite the large numbers of people involved in the accreditation process, the group who have to make the greatest commitment to it, architectural academics, are the ones who have the least say in it. Indeed, there has never been an attempt to find out what academics across the entire region think about professional accreditation.

In 2007, as part of the Carrick international benchmarking study of architecture schools, architecture academics across Oceania were surveyed by the authors about their opinion on a range of matters including professional accreditation. 57% of all academics responded to this survey and a series of follow-up interviews and focus groups took place in the 20 schools of architecture to gain a deeper level of understanding of the issues raised in the survey. The present paper records the results of a short series of Likert scale questions in the survey about accreditation, and then provides a detailed discussion of the views of academics in different schools. Opinions varied greatly across Australia and New Zealand and there were significant state variations within Australia as well. Overall, the responses build up a rich and compelling picture of the positive and negative dimensions of the professional accreditation of architecture schools.

1.0 RESEARCH METHOD

1.1 Scope and Timing of the Study

The focus of the international benchmarking study was 19 accredited architecture programs, and one recognised pathway into accredited programs, across three countries in the Oceania region. The three countries are Australia (with 16 schools), New Zealand (three schools) and Papua New Guinea (one school). The 15 accredited programs in Australia are at the following universities: University of Queensland (Qld), Queensland University of Technology (Qld), University of Newcastle (NSW), University of New South Wales (NSW), University of Sydney (NSW), University of Technology Sydney (NSW), University of Canberra (ACT), Deakin University (Vic), RMIT University (Vic), University of Melbourne (Vic), University of Tasmania (Tas), University of Adelaide (SA), University of South Australia (SA), Curtin University of Technology (WA) and the University of Western Australia (WA). The architecture program at Charles Darwin University (NT) is not accredited but it is part of a recognised pathway into accredited programs and it is included in the present research. The three schools in New Zealand are at the following universities, all of which are on the north island: UNITEC Institute of Technology, University of Auckland and Victoria University of Wellington. The school in Papua New Guinea is at the Papua New Guinea University of Technology. The school of architecture at Monash University had not commenced operation at the time the project was completed and the research did not include Oceania Polytechnic (Vic) in its terms of reference. The 20 schools of architecture that are the focus of this project are also the member schools of the Association of Architecture Schools of Australasia (AASA) and each school had a representative on the project steering committee and reference group. The project was lead by a team from the University of Newcastle and with other members drawn from the University of Tasmania and RMIT University. All of the research reported in this paper took place in 2007 and 2008.

1.2 Approach to qualitative data gathering and analysis

A two-stage process was adopted for the qualitative component of the benchmarking study of architecture schools in Australasia. The first stage involved an online survey and the second a series of interviews and focus groups with staff in the 20 schools. A number of categories of questions were framed for each of these processes. The categories covered teaching and learning issues, research, administration and connections to the architectural profession. One category of questioning, in both the on-line survey and in the focus groups, was professional accreditation.

In early 2007 a list of 319 full-time academic staff in architecture schools, across three countries, was determined and verified with the assistance of the AASA. This number excludes honorary, adjunct or conjoint staff, fractional staff (with a fraction below 0.6), short-term contract staff and casual or sessional staff. These 319 academics were individually invited to participate in an online survey comprising approximately 40 questions. The content of the survey was formulated through a combination of issues raised in a literature review on architectural education and those raised in discussions at AASA annual meetings. This initial list was supplemented with a set of topics identified by the project reference group.

Following ethics approval, an independent group administered the online survey to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Potential participants were individually invited to take part in the survey, which typically took less than 30 minutes to complete. Up to three reminder emails and invitations were sent to staff who did not complete the survey. At the end of the survey period, 181 valid responses were received, representing an overall response rate of 56.7%. The response rate for the survey was marginally higher in Australia (58.6%) than New Zealand (56.3%) and lower in PNG (18.2%). The highest response rate in Australia was from the University of Queensland (83.3%) and the lowest from the Queensland University of Technology (36.4%). Survey responses were analysed using SPSS software and the reports from this data were prepared. The independent administrators removed any information that allowed individuals to be identified.

Part two of the qualitative side of the process commenced with an analysis of the survey findings. These results were used to develop a set of open-ended questions that formed the basis of a series of semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Interviews were undertaken with heads of schools and heads of programs and focus groups were held with academic staff. Each of these events were planned to occur in each of the 20 schools and, with the exception of the school in PNG, all of the interviews and focus groups were conducted in person by members of the team. Participation in all of the events was voluntary. In total, 39 academic managers agreed to be interviewed and 73 staff took part in focus groups. There was no overlap between any of these sets. All of the semi-structured interviews and focus groups took place between August and October 2007.

The interviews with heads of schools and heads of programs were designed to allow for issues to be investigated in depth (Jones 2004). While the interviews were structured around a series of trigger questions, participants were able to provide important contextual information and to offer more detailed responses to any of the issues. Open-ended prompts were also integral to the interview process to ensure that participants had the opportunity to develop new areas of discussion if they desired. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and took place at a time and location convenient to the participant. All participants were assured of their confidentiality and anonymity in any published results and all signed consent forms. Most academics in leadership positions were interviewed in their offices and interviews were recorded for transcription.

For the focus groups, a purposive sampling approach (Patton 1990) was used to identify participants and to develop the best combination of theoretically rich information for the purposes of this study. Initial contact was made with academic staff by email and information statements on the project were provided. Full-time academic staff who did not take part in individual interviews were invited to contact the project team if they wished to be involved and their participation was based entirely on the principle of active informed consent. Staff participants were required to be full-time, long-term or contract academics responsible for teaching undergraduate or pre-professional programs in schools of architecture in Australia, New Zealand and PNG. When staff arrived for their focus groups they were given an information statement regarding the research, as well as a verbal introduction explaining what was expected of them and why the research is important. Staff were informed that the discussion would be recorded and that, in any reporting, their anonymity would be assured. Staff were then invited to fill out a consent form if they agreed to the conditions for participation, or they had the option to decline the invitation and leave the group. Focus group participants were then encouraged, through a series of semi-structured questions, to discuss their experiences of architectural education and issues that they felt were relevant to architectural education. Each focus group took up to two hours to complete and, where possible, a consensus approach was taken to the opinions of each group. Analysis of the data recording in the interviews and focus groups followed an iterative, qualitative approach (Miles and Huberman 1994). After the transcription process, a series of themes and categories were identified from which a codebook was developed for analysis of the text. Primary and secondary categories of codes were used with all textual data tabulated for thematic analysis. All transcripts were coded by hand and common and contrasting themes were analysed and related to the results of the online survey and of a literature review of architectural education.

Only the components of the on-line survey and the interviews and focus groups that are directly concerned with professional accreditation are considered and reported in the present paper. There are no responses from PNG on this topic because they have a different system of professional recognition through the Commonwealth Association of Architects (CAA). It is also worth noting that some of the New Zealand responses to questions about professional accreditation are from people who have also taught in the Australian system so their answers reflect experience in both countries.

2.0 ONLINE SURVEY RESULTS

In the online survey academics were invited to indicate their relative level of agreement with a range of statements concerning professional accreditation and its impact on the curriculum. These questions conform to the standard psychometric "likert scale" for survey responses (Babbie 2005; Meyers, et. al. 2005).

Of the five statements, academics most strongly agreed with the view that the accreditation process involves an increase in their workload. Academics also had some level of agreement with the statement that the accreditation process is important for maintaining standards. Respondents were more neutral on the statements that the accreditation process is forward-looking (assists in setting the future agenda) and provides direct assistance to the school's educational processes. Respondents most strongly disagreed with the statement that said that the accreditation process encouraged diversity (see Table 1).

Table 1. Survey result for questions asking academics to rate their relative agreement with a range of statements concerning professional accreditation.

Statements	Relative agreement	Likert result
Preparation for the National Visiting Panel for accreditation increases our workload	Strong Agreement	4.2
The accreditation process is important because it assists in maintaining standards within architectural education	Some agreement	3.7
The accreditation process is important because it assists in setting an agenda for the future directions in architectural education	Neutral	3.2
Feedback from the accreditation process has improved the school's curriculum	Neutral	3.2
The accreditation process encourages diversity in architecture schools	Disagreement	2.6

While it was to be expected that academics would find the accreditation process labour intensive and that it, within the limits of available resources, discouraged diversity, the other results were surprisingly neutral. In combination, the three statements about maintaining standards, setting agendas and assisting in improving education were, for the most part, only marginally supported.

3.0 FOCUS GROUP RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The initial “trigger” questions in the interviews and focus groups were positively framed. For example, the most common questions were; “tell us about the value and benefits of the accreditation process” and “tell us about your experiences of the accreditation process.” If only negative or critical responses were received, the interviewer typically asked if there “were positives as well?” Equally, if only positive or supportive responses were received the interviewers asked about negative dimensions as well.

In the more than 15,000 words transcribed from 110 academics who were interviewed on this topic, there were very few unreserved positive responses (<5%) and a roughly equal number of balanced responses and strongly negative responses. The general attitude towards professional accreditation was more positive in South Australia and Tasmania and more neutral in the ACT, Western Australia and New Zealand. The states of New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland were typically more negative in their responses. In this section, all quotations are taken from the interviews and focus groups described previously. The authors have endeavoured to use a wide range of source material from multiple countries and states to construct this analysis. To ensure anonymity, while still providing some level of acknowledgement of the type of person the answer was coming from, quotations are referenced in the following ways. If there is more than one school of architecture in a given state in Australia, then the state is used as a notation to describe the source of the quote (ie. Qld, NSW, Vic, SA, WA). Where there is only one school in a state (NT, Tas and ACT) it might be possible to determine the source of the quote and so it is identified as “Aus”. For New Zealand responses the coding “NZ” is used.

3.1 Positive or supportive responses

While few in both number and in total proportion of responses, the supportive comments were often well considered. They also tended to come from senior academics who had experienced the process from both the point of view of a school and of a panel member. Table 2 summarises the themes in the positive responses to questions concerning the value or benefit of the professional accreditation process. The frequency of the responses is relative to the complete set of responses and uses the following five descriptors and approximate numerical ranges: “very common” (greater than 20 responses), “common” (between 10 and 20 responses), “rare” (between 5 and 10 responses), “very rare” (between 2 and 5 responses) and “isolated” (1 or 2 responses only). While this is not a strict numerical classification, these ranges may give some indication of the dominance of each theme across the region.

Table 2: Themes and their relative frequency in positive or supportive responses.

Theme	Professional accreditation ...	Frequency
1.1	provides an opportunity for an external or independent review.	very rare
1.2	provides an opportunity for reflection.	very rare
1.3	provides for formal engagement between the academy and profession.	isolated
1.4	provides an opportunity for staff to express their views.	isolated
1.5	focuses attention on student work and student achievements.	isolated

Of the positive responses, the most frequent was that the accreditation process provides an opportunity for an independent review. In this context one academic describes the process as “really valuable” (NZ) and another as a useful “form of peer review” (Vic). One academic states that “it’s good to get other people to come in and look at what you are doing” (Vic) and its also “very good for any institution to have some kind of external review of its process and procedures” (Qld). This position is echoed in the view that “[i]t’s fair and it’s much better than an internal review” and in that sense it is “exemplary” (Qld). The next most frequent supportive theme praises the accreditation process as providing “a framework for reflective practice” (Aus) or notes that the possibility of “reflection is the important bit” (NSW). Another senior academic argues that, if its primary purpose is to offer “constructive feedback” then it “allows you to take stock, which in professional degrees is essential” (NSW).

Two more isolated themes describe the accreditation process as being valuable because it ensures that the profession and the academy communicate and that academics in some schools are able to voice their views and hear those of their colleagues. In the third of the positive themes, senior academic staff separately argue that the accreditation process is critical to architecture schools because it provides a formal opportunity for the profession and the academy to meet. One states that the “accreditation process is the fundamental means and mechanism by which schools and the profession communicate” (Vic). The second suggests that the process is important because it ensures “that there is an understanding between the profession [...] and universities or schools of architecture about what is expected of graduates” (Aus). In the fourth of the positive themes, academics note that opportunities for all staff to meet and be heard can be relatively rare and thus, the accreditation process offers a “valuable” opportunity “to hear your colleagues’ feedback and sense peoples’ opinions” (NZ); another says that the accreditation visit provides “the only forum that we have to vent our concerns” (NZ).

Finally, two respondents thought that the accreditation process had the benefit of focussing the attention of architects and external academics on student work. One states, “it’s incredibly good for students’ self-esteem to have a visiting panel come through and look at their work, and [offer] acknowledgement for their work” (Aus).

3.2 Balanced or neutral responses

Almost half the academic staff who were interviewed or took part in focus groups recorded views that suggest that the accreditation process possesses both positive and negative dimensions. This attitude partially explains the neutral response to some of the survey questions. For example, one academic states that accreditation “is a good thing [but it is also] a painful thing for us simply because it involves a lot of work” (NSW). Another in the same state echoes this statement saying “it’s a worthwhile exercise, but it’s essentially a painful exercise” (NSW). One academic summarises the entire accreditation process as “a necessary evil” and then qualifies this statement by noting that it is “only an ‘evil’ because of the amount of work it takes” to complete (Aus). Thus, responses in this category are usually balanced (both positive and negative in combination), producing a neutral or ambivalent outcome, rather than being neutral in a noncommittal sense. Some other generalisations that could be made about the balanced responses are that they are often brief, the opinion is rarely developed in detail and that there was a large degree of repetition in answers. This category of responses was the least well considered and it had the least diversity of response themes. Table 3 summarises the themes in the balanced or neutral responses to questions concerning the value or benefit of the professional accreditation process; the frequency of the responses is noted.

Table 3: Themes and their relative frequency in balanced or neutral responses.

Theme	Professional accreditation ...	Frequency
2.1	is necessary for attracting domestic student enrolments—a statement typically balanced with—but this is of less importance than it once was.	very common
2.2	gives a school a marketing advantage particularly for international enrolments—a statement typically balanced with—but why attract students when we do not have the resources to support them.	common
2.3	has the potential to provide leverage for a school—a statement typically balanced with—but the university administration ignores the accreditation report anyway.	common

The two most common responses in this category are associated with the pragmatic need for professional accreditation as a way of attracting students. In the first of these, which was repeated in most parts of Australia and in New Zealand, the accreditation process is described as important, but only from the student’s point of view; one academic states that it is “valuable for the students but not so valuable for the staff” (NZ). A senior academic describes professional accreditation as “completely necessary” simply because the school has to “be accredited” to attract students. “If students want to come here and study architecture to become architects we need accreditation” (NZ). Another academic argues that:

[i]t would be silly of us not to meet [the requirements of] accreditation. We would lose a large part of our public worth. But [...] the importance of being a registered architect has declined; it is not protected legally in the way it used to be and I don’t believe it holds the same social or cultural worth as it used to. (NZ)

In the second theme, two academics expand on the value of accreditation by noting that while the real benefit is for students, there are also considerable marketing advantages for schools. “It’s valuable in terms of market positioning” the first says, “we would have no students if we weren’t accredited; its value is enormous” (Vic). The same academic then asks rhetorically, “[d]o we get anything out of the accreditation process” beyond the marketing advantage, and answers, “[n]ot much, no” (Vic). The second academic states that:

[w]e need accreditation [...] for two reasons. One is that many of our graduates will want to become architects and they will need a degree [from an accredited school]. But more importantly we need to attract people who think they want to be architects to begin with and they’re not going to be attracted to a school [that isn’t accredited]. The paradox though is that first year students have no idea what architecture is. What they think they want to be, and are signing up for, will change dramatically. So we’re caught in a bind. We need to have this affiliation to attract these people to something which they don’t [even] know what it is. (NZ)

The third theme in the balanced response set of results is associated with the capacity of the accreditation process to influence the university. For example, one Australian academic argues that the primary value of the accreditation process is that it can “be used politically; to leverage certain intentions towards the university” (Vic). Another proposes that “the accreditation process is important for architecture programs, because [...] it can reinforce [...] the way that architectural education is conducted [...] and sends a signal to the institution about the speciality and the particularities of that way of teaching” (Qld). One academic bluntly sums up the accreditation process as a “complete [...] waste of time. [Its only] use would be if the accreditation comments could scare the university into providing more resources; [as] a lever” (Vic). This last point is evidently the problem and the main reason why most of these responses are not more positive. For every observation that the accreditation process can provide leverage, an equal or greater number note that university administrators are no longer inclined to listen to accreditation panels. “The [accreditation panels] don’t have the power to [influence] the university, only [...] the School. If [the accreditation panel] could go to the Vice Chancellor and demand change we would value and respect it” but “it doesn’t” have this kind of power (Vic). A corresponding view is that

institutions are less tuned into that professional voice than they used to be. [Today, the] accreditation visit is [...] given less of a profile within the university than it used to be. You know, the request to meet the Vice Chancellor as part of [it] is almost treated as an aside now, and they might not turn-up anyway. So, I think that shows you its real value. (Qld)

3.3 Negative or critical responses

The negative or critical responses were extensive, had frequently been carefully considered and were often developed in detail. Given the positive framing of the questions, such a result is unlikely to be a methodological bias, but could be a reflection of the fact that this is a topic academics feel strongly about but are rarely given any opportunity to express these opinions. Alternatively, in these responses there is also a sense of a growing unease about the accreditation process; as if opinions were once more positive but have since deteriorated. Table 4 summarises the themes in the negative or critical responses to questions concerning the value or benefit of the professional accreditation process.

Table 4: Themes and their relative frequency in negative or critical responses.

Theme	Professional accreditation ...	Frequency
3.1	is costly, time consuming and has a direct negative impact on teaching.	very common
3.2	discourages diversity amongst architecture programs.	common
3.3	is unlikely to offer useful advice or uncover genuine problems.	common
3.4	is confusing, inefficient and inconsistent in its documentation.	common
3.5	panels are over influenced by the preconceived ideas of panel members.	common
3.6	is inflexible and disconnected from contemporary concerns in architectural practice.	rare

The first, and most dominant theme in the entire set of responses to questions about accreditation relates to the cost of the process; this is both its direct financial cost and its indirect cost in terms of an academics' time. Moreover, academics note that the cost of the process has a substantial negative impact on students. This is because architecture schools, disciplines and programs typically have a "one line budget" that must cover every cost. In an accreditation year, the substantial cost of the process is taken directly out of the teaching budget and, in parallel, staff resources are re-directed away from teaching to prepare for the process. For all of these reasons, it was not surprising that the first response from many academics about the accreditation process is that it is "very expensive" (WA); "Oh my God, it is such an expensive exercise" (NSW); "the cost is unrealistic," (NSW); "estimated cost of \$100,000" (NSW); "an enormous amount of time goes into it" (SA), "it's an ordeal" (NSW) and its "tedious" (Aus). "We're talking about the cost of running two design subjects [just spent] on a dinner [for the NVP]" (NSW). In addition to the direct costs, there are also the administrative burdens of the process. The challenge is "mainly time" (Aus), observes one academic, "it's the workload: preparing for it" (SA) and another adds that the "time spent [producing] documentation [which] is again undertaken by a full-time staff [member is the] problem" (SA). A Queensland academic observes that another professional discipline in the university has "just been accredited and they had about five or six people dedicated to" the whole process, and while "I'm not without [some] support, it's a huge burden"(Qld).

The second theme is also reflected in the on-line survey results. Academics find the accreditation process discourages diversity in two ways. First, there is an expectation that all schools will be able to teach and assess the same extensive set of competencies. Second, the directions given by panels tend to ignore regional differences and encourage schools to follow a range of similar approaches. As one academic says, the critical problem is that professional accreditation processes do "not allow for a diversity of programmes to exist, [each] with their own personality" (WA). Another senior academic is similarly critical of the way panels look "for the same things from every school" because this "makes it very difficult to create difference" (NSW). The academic goes on to state that the real risk is that the "accreditation process has a homogenising affect" on all architecture programs (NSW).

There [must] be areas where individual universities derive their particular uniqueness; whether it's a technical orientation, a theoretical orientation or some other orientation, they can take those things on and teach more or less of them, or not teach them at all, and then there's those things which ought to be taught by practice. Those things need to be cleared up, but at the moment the goalposts shift all over the place depending on the nature and make-up of the NVP. (NSW)

A Queensland academic describes the overarching problem with the accreditation process as that it is "overly prescriptive" (Qld) and another makes a similar point arguing that:

panels should not be so deterministic in the way that they address their recommendations [and] say, "you must do this; you must do that". I think that they have to see that they're looking at generic based standards, and that there might be opportunities to improve on those, which they could make broader recommendations about, to give the institutions scope to follow up on them. (Qld)

A Victorian academic offers the definition that; accreditation is the process by which "the profession tries to hem you in from where you're going" (Vic).

Many senior academics voiced serious doubts about the ability of accreditation panels to provide useful directions to schools. Academics described the process as "flawed and difficult" (NSW) or "fairly flawed" (Qld) and noted that the "accreditation panel is a week to be endured and then you get back to business" (NZ). Others said it is a "useful check but [I] have doubts about [the] overall value" (NSW) and it "is a functional requirement, but what it actually tells us about our operation is useless" (NZ). In essence, academics feel that the accreditation process has little capacity to uncover the genuine strengths and weaknesses of a school; it is only able to identify superficial issues. Thus, one academic states that the "NVP group come [here and then] they rapidly try [to] get a sort of a whiff of what's going on, they sort of delve into some material and come up with some recommendations which, in our experience [are] just inaccurate" (Qld). A similar point is made that, "there's a huge disjunction between what they think we're doing and what we think we're going" (NZ) and, as a result of this, they tend to "fixate on minor things and they fixate on anything you argue with them about" (NZ). This leads a senior academic to suggest that if the professional accreditation panels were serious about finding the problems in a school they should "come in here and teach for a

week and then they can go away and say, 'Well, I've got that school pretty sorted out', because that's the way they find out. And the students would benefit from all their ability and knowledge and brains and they would get insights that they can't get any other ways" (NZ). A senior Victorian academic concludes that the accreditation process has "very little value to us. It just seems like it's a licensing operation. It's like [asking] is it any value to you to do [a driver's] licence test every few years? Not really no, I can drive. Yet, they have the SVP come every year and then the NVP every five years" (Vic). To make matters worse, "there is no right to appeal or a right of debate" (NZ) and the process is "not transparent" (Aus) and usually misses obvious problems while concentrating on minor things.

Another theme in the responses was academics being critical of the accreditation documentation describing it as "incoherent" (NSW) and "lacking consistency" (Aus). Several responses to this issue raised the problem of having a joint accrediting body; "the AACA and the RAIA [...] have different sets of criteria [and] that's a complete nonsense. They've got to get their act together and create a unified set of criteria against which schools of architecture are accredited" (NSW). A related and recurring theme in the criticisms is about the lack of differentiation between the educational responsibilities of schools and of practices. The following are quotes from different people in different states on the same issue.

The accreditation document lists all of the criteria required of someone wishing to become registered as an architect. It's assumed *de facto* that the universities will teach all that because it's listed as the criteria to be met when accrediting an institution. Whereas in fact, two-sevenths of that [content] typically is the responsibility of practice and that's not identified. (NSW)

Architectural education in universities is five years and then students graduate [...] and then they move into practice where they spend two years getting professional practice experience. They [then] sit professional practice exams, which are outside the control of the universities and they have to acquire a certain range of architectural experiences [...] which [universities] can't offer them. I think the divisions between what we provide and what the profession provides are blurred and need to be clarified. (Aus)

The fifth theme in the negative or critical responses was related to the membership of panels and in particular those panellists who seemed to have preconceived ideas about a program, or see themselves as "policing" the architecture schools. For example, a Victorian academic argues that too many panels have "a real kind of gatekeeper mentality about [them]. Some of the people who seem to relish being on those panels can be unhelpful [and] there's a sense of the 'cop' about some of that" (Vic); "they're like warriors coming in to sort people out" (Aus) states another. The idea that members of some panels "see it as policing" (Vic) is voiced by several academics as is the concern that panel members often "have a singular agenda which may not align with [that of] the school" (WA).

Look, in my experience, it's very much to do with the people who come, who make up the panel, and I think a real key for them is to maintain professional conduct, and not to bring their own agendas to schools [...] I find that the panels can be skewed by individuals in a way that's unhelpful. (Qld)

A South Australian academic argues that "the NVP is full of architects who think they can run architecture schools better than the schools do and would like to and see the accreditation process as an opportunity to demonstrate that." (SA). A New South Wales academic states that "mad people get on the panel sometimes and they cause trouble" and this undermines the work of the other "very fine, very helpful" people who are on panels (NSW). A related criticism concerns the shifting membership of panels; for example, one academic notes that even though very little may have changed in a school over five years "I've seen boards come through a few years later with an entirely different composition [and] with an entirely different set of recommendations" (NZ). This view is echoed by another academic who observes that if "you have different people on the panel you'll have different recommendations" (Aus) forcing the school to change direction with each change of membership.

The sixth and final theme relates to the lack of adaptability of the accreditation process and the observation that it is focussed on an outdated model of professional practice. This issue was typically raised by both senior academics and those currently engaged in architectural practice. One academic states that the accreditation criteria are not "flexible and adaptive enough to deal with rapidly changing conditions in the building industry" (NZ). A related comment offered by a senior academic is that the "most bizarre" thing is that the accreditation process "only looks backwards; which I consider to be completely insane. We just had [another profession's] accreditation board here and they looked [...] both backwards" to what had been achieved "and forwards" to the future of the profession (Qld).

4.0 CONCLUSION

In any study of this type it is important to remember that the comments, both positive and negative, about the architectural accreditation process are the personal opinions of academics, they are not necessarily accurate or correct. There are some comments recorded in the responses (across all three categories) which appear to misunderstand various dimensions of the accreditation process. Some of these opinions may also reflect flaws in past processes but not necessarily the present ones; this may be the case for some of the New Zealand comments. However, the strong patterns that have emerged from responses from more than 200 architectural academics (in both the survey and face-to-face sessions) in 20 schools cannot simply be dismissed in this way. Despite this, without further detailed research there are few ways to triangulate staff perceptions about the accreditation process to test their validity. One possible way might be to compare the 14 themes (1.1 – 3.6) that are identified in the present study with the 7 findings (i – vii), identified previously, of the Higher Education Council study of all professions accreditation processes. If the strengths and weakness of the Australian system identified in the mid 1990s align with those identified for the architectural profession a decade later, then a case might be made for the validity of some of these points. If there is no alignment this could mean that the academic perceptions are less likely to be true or that the architectural profession may have different problems to the rest of the professions. While such a comparison is not

conclusive it does allow the perceptions of architectural academics to be tested against those of an independent review.

Table 5 provides a list of the 14 themes cross-referenced to the 7 findings. In the case of nine of the themes, there is a relatively close alignment between the perceptions of academic staff in 2007 and of the national review in 1996. For example, both directly identified the importance of professional accreditation for quality assurance and marketing. Similarly, both identified the tendency of professional accreditation systems and documentation to fail to provide useful advice, to encourage unhealthy homogeneity and to be confusing in their expectations. Five of the themes have no alignment with the findings of the 1996 study. In a few cases this is because the topic was outside the terms of reference of the earlier study. In the other cases the reason may be particular to either the architectural accreditation process or to architectural academics.

Table 5. Triangulation of themes in the present analysis of architectural academics perceptions of the accreditation process and results from the Higher Education Council study.

#	Theme (abbreviated)	Triangulation to HEC Study
1.1	external or independent review	Alignment: themes 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3 and finding (ii), identified previously, all stress the importance of accreditation processes for quality assurance.
1.2	opportunity for reflection	
1.3	formal engagement with the profession	
1.4	opportunity for staff to express their views	Misalignment: the 1996 study also identified the importance of engaging a wide range of stakeholders including community groups and academics. Opinion is divided over whether or not there is a reasonable level of engagement; theme 1.4 suggests this is the case, themes 3.2 and 3.6 suggest that this isn't true.
1.5	focuses attention on student work	No alignment, possibly outside the scope of the 1996 study.
2.1	is necessary for student enrolments	Alignment: themes 2.1, 2.2 and finding (iii) agree that professional accreditation is critical for attracting students.
2.2	marketing advantage	
2.3	potential leverage	
3.1	is costly	No alignment, possibly only relevant for architectural accreditation or academics.
3.2	discourages diversity	Alignment: findings (iv), (v) and (vi) of the 1996 study have strong parallels to themes 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4 in the present study. The 1996 study found that professional bodies should restrict their involvement to offering advice about the attainment of competencies, not advice on how they should be attained. This is because accreditation panels are typically not well versed in local systems and have a tendency to ignore local conditions in favour of universal solutions. Finding (vii) perfectly matches several comments in the present study collected under theme 3.4.
3.3	is not useful	
3.4	is confusing, inefficient and inconsistent	
3.5	Influence of panellists	No alignment, possibly outside the scope of the 1996 study.
3.6	disconnected from practice	No alignment, possibly only relevant for architectural accreditation or academics.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Human Research Ethics approval number for the project is: H-496-0607. The project team acknowledge the financial support of the Carrick Institute for Teaching and Learning.

REFERENCES

- Babbie, Earl R. (2005). *The Basics of Social Research*. Thomson Wadsworth.
- Boyer, E. L. and Mitgang, L. D. (1996). *Building Community: A New Future for Architecture Education and Practice*. New Jersey: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
- Clarke, D. (1994). *The Architecture of Alienation: The Political Economy of Professional Education*, New Brunswick and London, Transaction Publishers.
- Cuff, D. (1991). *Architecture: The Story of Practice*. Cambridge and London: MIT Press.
- Duffey, F. and Hutton, L. (1998). *Architectural Knowledge: The Idea of a Profession*, New York: Routledge.
- Freeland, J. M. (1971). *The Making of a Profession: A History of the Growth and Work of the Architectural Institutes in Australia*, Angus and Robertson in association with RAlA, Australia.
- Gutman, R. (1989) *Architectural Practice: A Critical View*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press.
- Jones, S. (2004) "Depth Interviewing" in Clive Seale (Ed.) *Social Research Methods: A Reader*. London: Routledge, 257-260.
- Higher Education Council, (1996). *Professional education and credentialism*, Canberra : Australian Govt. Pub. Service.
- Higher Education Council, (1997). *The best practice guide for professional bodies, including the guiding principles for the assessment and recognition of overseas skills and qualifications*. Canberra: Australian Govt. Pub. Service.
- Kostof, S. (1977) ed. *The Architect: Chapters in the History of the Profession*, Oxford University Press.
- Meyers, Lawrence S.; Anthony Guarino, Glenn Gamst (2005). *Applied Multivariate Research: Design and Interpretation*. Sage Publications Inc,
- Miles, M.B. and Huberman, A.M. (1994) *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*. 2nd Ed. Sage: Newbury Park, CA.
- Patton, M.Q. (1990). *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* (2nd Ed.). Sage Publications: C.A.
- Woods, M. N. (1999) *From craft to profession: the practice of architecture in nineteenth-century America*, Berkeley : University of California Press.