

Chapter 65

A Practitioner Based Evaluation of Project Management Knowledge and Education: The Australian Case

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ABSTRACT

Many scholars have criticized formal project management education as being based on various Bodies of Knowledge (BOKs), lacking real-world application and representing a narrow view of the profession. Through a survey questionnaire, this research inquiry has examined the alignment of project management professional needs with the aspirations of project management education within Australian universities. The research findings show positive links between project management education, increased employability, better workplace performance and successful professional careers. However, the research has also identified poor alignment of current project management education in Australian universities with project management practice and recommends possible revision of project management education programs to meet the knowledge requirements expressed by project management professionals. The findings of this research contribute to the debate in respect of bringing project management education closer to project management practice.

INTRODUCTION

Modern project management has a brief history which commenced with the advent of the Gantt chart in 1910 and then had a long pause, until the Program Evaluation and Review Technique (PERT) and Critical Path Methods (CPMs) were introduced in the 1950s (Burke, 2010). However, it was not until 1969 when the Project Management Institute (PMI) was formed in the USA that project management

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began to receive formal professional recognition. This professional body was followed by others such as the Association of Project Management (APM), the International Project Management Association (IPMA) and the Australian Institute of Project Management (AIPM).

One of the most important organizational developments in recent years has been the significant growth in project work across different sectors and industries (Winter et al. 2006) with organizations placing more emphasis on project management training and development of their staff. Organizations involved in project work have also required their project managers to obtain formal project management certification for promotion or to retain their existing positions (Teplitz, 2001).

However, over the years, the level of practitioner development in the workplace has progressively reduced and academic institutions specialising in project management education have been pressed to take on the responsibility for preparing trained professional project managers (Crawford et al., 2006).

Interest in formal project management education has grown significantly and an industry has evolved around project management education and training (Thomas & Mengel, 2008). This growth in formal education and learning in project management is not without criticism: many scholars have challenged the relevance and rigour of the education design and delivery models (Berggren & Soderlund, 2008; Crawford et al., 2006; Thomas & Mengel, 2008) and particularly its relevance to real-world application. The best outcome of project management educational approaches based on Bodies of Knowledge (BOKs) can be a transfer of pure knowledge but limited applied knowledge (Vaughan, 2007). Bolton and Nie (2010) also agree that knowledge acquired at universities leave students unprepared for the practical demands of real project environments.

It is important to identify the knowledge and skills which are central to successful project management and how professionals view the role of project management education in enhancing workplace performance and practice. In this context, this research sets out to investigate project management education in Australian universities engaging industry opinion from the project management profession on the matter. It garners how project managers view postgraduate education within their discipline. It is thought that the Australian experience may have parallels with that of other countries.

This paper will begin with a review of project management practice, exploring its generic nature and usage across industries and sectors. It then debates project management education, its complexities, pedagogical aspects and also reviews university level programs in Australia. Following this the study's research methodology will be discussed with an emphasis on accessing participants and the analysis framework. Finally, results are discussed and conclusions made.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT PRACTICE

Recognized project management practice appears to have its roots in the defence industry spreading to construction, manufacturing and IT sectors (Walmsley, 1996). Burke (2010) contends that most of the early project management tools reflected a focus on the scheduling and costing aspects of project management. The emphasis on scheduling was described by Weaver (2007, p. 4) as the 'genesis of modern project management'. Dinsmore and Cabanis-Brewin (2006) argue that the legacy which emphasised the scientific nature of project management as compared to the art of project management left its mark by defining the attributes of a good project manager for many years to come. During the late 20th century, project management practice grew as a comprehensive body of knowledge and was presented through

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