

Much work – little impact: The systematic misalignment of learning outcomes in undergraduate accounting programmes with professional expectations

Leopold Bayerlein

University of New England, Armidale, Australia
leopold.bayerlein@une.edu.au

Mel Timpson

University of Canberra, Canberra, Australia
mel.timpson@canberra.edu.au

Undergraduate degree programmes in accounting are expected to produce graduates that possess the skills and knowledge required to enter the accounting profession successfully. The higher education community has long since recognised the changing nature of accounting, and accepted that successful accounting practice requires more than well-developed technical skills. Given the requirements of contemporary accounting practice, higher education providers have undertaken extensive work to improve the professional skills, including those related to teamwork, problem solving, analytical assessment, and communication, of accounting graduates. However, despite this work, the accounting profession continues to criticise the limited professional skills of graduates, as well as the extensive mismatch between students' perceptions of professional work environments and contemporary work reality. This project builds on prior work in this area and assesses the extent to which degree level learning outcomes of professionally accredited undergraduate accounting programmes in Australia match the widely accepted minimum educational expectations of the accounting profession. This assessment enables an evaluation of the extent to which changes to accredited undergraduate programmes (1) are aligned with the profession's minimum expectations, (2) are communicated to (prospective) students and the wider society, (3) are likely to deliver future graduates that meet the profession's expectations. Given that the profession's minimum education expectations are widely accepted within the higher education community, and extensive prior work (including research and OLT funded projects) has focused on aligning degree level learning outcomes with professional expectations, a high level of alignment was expected. However, the findings of this project paint a different picture.

The project's findings demonstrate that most accredited undergraduate degree providers fail to meet a large proportion (and in some cases all) of the profession's minimum expectations, regardless of the provider's standing within the higher education community. In addition, the project demonstrates that the technical skill focus of contemporary learning outcomes continues to misrepresent the nature of contemporary accounting practice to (prospective) students and the wider society. Lastly, the project's findings highlight that the misalignment between the profession's expectations and the focus of undergraduate accounting degree programmes is likely to impact future generations of graduates.

The findings of this project demonstrate that prior work, as well as the currently applicable professional accreditation procedures and policies, have not been able to align student's learning outcomes with contemporary professional practice. The project's recommendations are highly relevant for undergraduate degree providers and the accounting profession because they enable future work to be targeted towards key success areas.