

Educating for excellence

Peter Judge has been reading the second report from the Business/Higher Education Round Table

AN EARLIER note (*inCite* 5, pp 12-13) looked briefly at *Aiming Higher*, a report from the Business/Higher Education Round Table. The Round Table has continued its work, and its second report, *Educating for Excellence*, has just appeared. This report is again in two parts, one expressing fairly general views on quality, the other examining priorities.

In the first part, twenty-eight key education and business leaders generally agreed that the best Australian graduates are world class, but that there is a larger disparity between the best students and those who just pass. This is not just the problem of knowledge versus training for the first job—increasingly it appears that students have problems in applying their knowledge in a work environment. Moreover, the ethos of excellence in business is not self-evident to all graduates.

A serious concern raised by almost all those interviewed (as in the first report) was the standard of secondary education in Australia.

priorities for both secondary and university education lie in the development of thinking and decision-making skills, and the learning of communication skills.

Secondary education is regarded as not adequately equipping students for either work or higher education—it is thought to be a major factor limiting the attainment of the goal of excellence in university standards.

In the second part, university lecturers and business supervisors of newly-recruited graduates agreed that priorities for both secondary and university education lie in the development of thinking and decision-making skills, and the learning of communication skills. They considered the development of those skills to be of greater importance than the achievement of knowledge objectives (broad general knowledge at secondary school and professional knowledge at university) which, in turn, was considered to be more important than learning knowledge and skills directly related to the workplace.

As before, some interesting differences emerged between the business and university respondents in this section of the survey. While business respondents considered communication skills to be among the most important characteristics looked for in selecting graduate recruits, university respondents indicated that only moderate emphasis was given to the development of such skills in university programs. For the university respondents, greatest emphasis was placed on giving students theoretical knowledge in the professional field, whereas having such knowledge was ranked only seventh among characteristics considered by business in recruiting staff.

The two groups agreed on the importance given to the capacities to make decisions and solve problems, to learn new skills and procedures, to apply knowledge to the workplace, and to work with minimum supervision. Both groups judged the standards achieved in most characteristics to be in the adequate range, unlike the vice-chancellors and CEOs of the earlier survey (see *inCite* 5) who judged them to be rather less than adequate. Characteristics deemed adequate to good in the present survey were theoretical knowledge in the professional field, capacity to learn new skills and procedures, and capacity to use computer technology. Characteristics considered of the poorest standard were general business knowledge, understanding business ethics, and (for the business but not university respondents) communication skills.

Both university and business respondents agreed that professional skill levels will need to be raised considerably in the years ahead if Australia is to maintain its international competitiveness. They also agreed that greater university-business coordination is needed if the concept of lifelong professional education is to be realised, and that undergraduate education for the professions should include not only professional studies but also general studies drawn from across the humanities, social sciences, and sciences.

And although the report looks mainly at education and recruitment for business, we do well to heed its findings in our own professional context. ■



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