

## 2003 AFAANZ CONFERENCE MANUSCRIPT DETAILS

*Authors must include the following details on the cover page and include this as part of the file containing the paper.*

<b>Title of Paper</b>	Accounting Education: Have we heeded the calls for reform in New Zealand?
<b>Submitting Author*</b>	Paul Wells *
Affiliation/Institution	Auckland University of Technology
Department	Accounting and Finance Faculty of Business
Postal Box/Address (if any)	Private Bag 92006
City/State	Auckland 1020
Country & Code	New Zealand
Email Address	paul.wells@aut.ac.nz
Phone (Office)	64 9 917 9999 x 5750
Fax	64 9 917 9884
Co-Author 1 and affiliation	Jenny Bygrave Auckland University of Technology
Co-Author 2 and affiliation	Philippa Gerbic Auckland University of Technology
Co-Author 3 and Affiliation	Ineke Kranenburg Auckland University of Technology

\*Please asterisk the presenting author

## **Accounting Education:**

### **Have we heeded the calls for reform in New Zealand?**

#### **Abstract**

Much has been written about the teaching and learning deficiencies in Accounting Education. The recommended strategies for addressing these deficiencies have included a focus on the development of professional capability skills. Many tertiary institutions have grappled with the dilemma and developed a number of strategies to address this criticism.

Most attempts to measure the nature and extent of change to tertiary programmes in accountancy, collect data from current or graduating students or the institution itself. This study seeks instead, to collect feedback from accountancy graduates employed in public practice with three to five years post graduation professional experience.

The purpose of the study is to identify the capabilities which are considered to be the most important for successful practice in accountancy during the first years after graduation and to identify the extent to which New Zealand teaching institutions have focused on these in the delivery of their study programmes.

The results provide a useful insight into where progress has been made and as a consequence heeded the calls for programme reform as well as providing the basis for further improvement.

Keywords: professional capabilities, teaching and learning quality, accounting education reforms

## **INTRODUCTION**

Much has been written about the teaching and learning deficiencies of accounting education (AAA, 1986; Arthur Andersen et al., 1989; AECC, 1990; Albrecht & Sack, 2000).

Suggested strategies for addressing these deficiencies have focused on broadening the curriculum and developing alternative delivery strategies. These suggestions have been endorsed by academia (AAA, 1986), practitioners (Arthur Andersen & Co. et al, 1989; AECC 1990), and the professional bodies (IFAC, 1996).

A key focus in these recommendations was for the development of intellectual, interpersonal and communication skills in the undergraduate accounting programme. The purpose of which was to *enable the professional accountant to make successful use of the knowledge gained through education* (IFAC para 16, 1996). It is acknowledged that these skills are not usually acquired from specific courses, but rather, they derive from the total effect of the educational programme and professional experience (IFAC, 1996)

Sundem (1999) concludes, that through the encouragement and support of the AECC, change to accounting pedagogy has occurred in the United States of America. Research undertaken by Adler & Milne (1998) on the other hand, casts doubt on the nature and extent of pedagogical change in New Zealand.

## **BACKGROUND**

Many teaching institutions source feedback on the extent to which programmes prepare students for professional practice from current students, current graduates, or industry based advisory committee members. The disadvantage of sourcing data from current students and graduates is that they do not have the benefit of professional practice to inform their views. On the other hand

many industry based advisory committee members have usually had many years professional experience and while they usually have a clear understanding of the requirements of professional practice, a significant period of time has elapsed since their tertiary study and their first years of professional practice.

In 2001 the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) initiated a research programme which sought to address these issues. It is based on the assumption that those in the best position to assess the relevance and usefulness of tertiary study are people who have three to five years professional practice, post graduation.

As a consequence, Scott, Yates & Wilson (2001) sought to *backward map* (Elmore, 1979) from such a group in order to identify how the undergraduate curriculum and the corresponding assessment strategies may be improved. Backward mapping involves identifying an intended outcome and then identifying the steps necessary to achieve this outcome.

In their study Scott & Yates (2002) sought to identify:

- *the capabilities which are seen to be most important for successful professional practice during the first few years after graduation;*
- *the extent to which the Universities at which the participating graduates had studied focused on these capabilities;*
- *key ways of improving the content, delivery, support and assessment of the undergraduate programs in the light of the study's findings.*

Two detailed pilot studies were undertaken, one with information technology graduates and the other with engineering graduates. This study used an on-line survey questionnaire with the

questions being centred around two research frameworks; professional capabilities and teaching and learning quality.

### **Professional Capability Framework**

The Professional Capability framework (Scott, Yates & Wilson 2001) has been developed, tested and refined over the past two decades and includes research on professional competence and expertise by Schön (1983), Morgan (1988), Gonczi and Hager (1990), Tennant (1991), Gardiner (1995), Goleman(1998), Scott (1996), and Harvey<sup>1</sup>.

The recurring findings from this research, which are consistent with the recommendations of Arthur Andersen & Co. et al. (1989), AECC (1990) and IFAC (1996), are that professional capability is comprised of five interlocked components. These are represented in Diagram One.

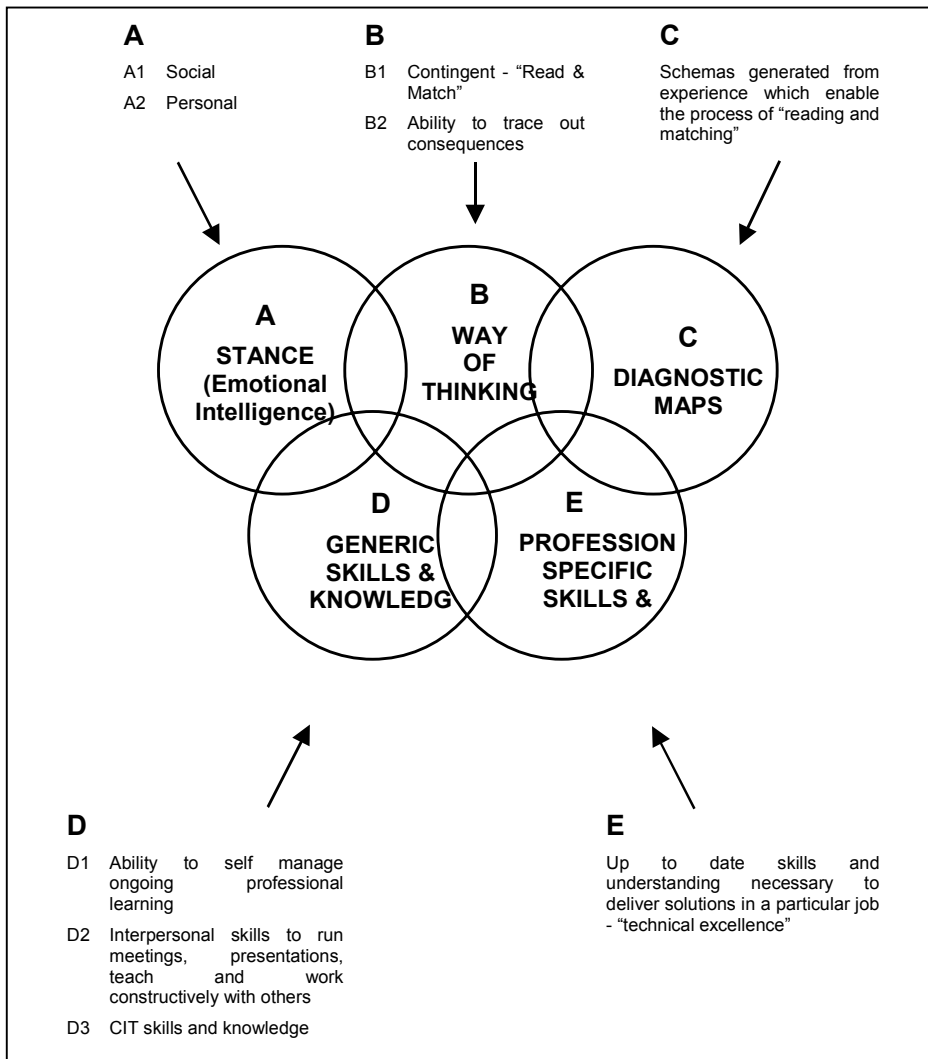
While this framework acknowledges that the possession of generic or job-specific skills (D & E) are necessary, they are not sufficient for effective professional performance. What is of equal importance is that the person possesses (Scott, Yates & Wilson 2001):

- *a high level of social and personal emotional intelligence (A);*
- *a contingent way of thinking, an ability ‘read’ what is going on in each new situation and ‘match’*
- *an appropriate course of action, and a capacity to deftly trace out and assess the consequences of alternative courses of action (B);*
- *a set of ‘diagnostic maps’ (C) developed from handling previous practice problems in the unique work context.*

---

<sup>1</sup> See UK centre for Research into Quality at <http://www.uce.ac.uk/crq>

**Diagram One**



It is these maps which enable the person to accurately ‘read the signs’ and figure out what is really going on in each new situation and to determine when and when not to deploy different generic and technical skills. The pilot studies (Scott & Yates 2002) indicate that it is when things go wrong, when a troubling problem or dilemma emerges that professional capability is most tested not when things are running smoothly or routinely.

## Teaching and Learning Framework

The Teaching and Learning framework was developed from a research base<sup>2</sup> which identifies the criteria used by students to determine that one higher education course is of high quality whereas another is not. The recurring findings can be summarised as a set of quality checkpoints for tertiary learning programs. They indicate that students are most impressed when their university courses (Scott, Yates & Wilson, 2001):

- Are immediately relevant to their particular background, abilities, needs and experiences ;
- Provide more opportunities for active learning than they do for passive learning.
- Consistently link theory with practice;
- Effectively manage students' expectations right from the outset;
- Ensure that learning proceeds in a clear direction and is 'digestible';
- Use a valid graduate capability profile to specifically generate appropriate assessment tasks.
- Provide them with opportunities to pursue flexible learning pathways;
- Ensure that feedback on assessment tasks is both timely and detailed.
- Not only include opportunities for self-managed learning using both digital and paper-based resources but actively coach students on how to undertake it;
- Provide support and administrative services which are easily accessed, responsive to students needs and which specifically work together to optimise the total experience which a student has of the university or college;
- acknowledge prior learning and make provision for its recognition in both learning and assessment.

---

<sup>2</sup> See for example summaries of this research in Ryan G: *Learner assessment and program evaluation*, PROBLARC, Sydney, Ch 6, and in Foley, G (2000) *Understanding Adult Education and Training*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition.

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This study seeks to report on the views of high performing accountancy graduates with 3-5 years experience employed by chartered accountants in public practice in New Zealand to ascertain:

1. the capabilities which are seen to be most important for successful professional practice in accountancy during the first years after graduation,
2. the extent to which universities at which the participating graduates had studied, focused on these issues, thereby heeding the accounting education reform recommendations with respect to skill development,
3. key ways to improving the content, delivery, support and assessment of the undergraduate accounting programmes.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study replicated the UTS study and was undertaken by the Faculty of Business at the Auckland University of Technology in partnership with the UTS Quality Development Unit and New Zealand Chartered Accounting firms.

A two phase approach (Parlett & Dearden, 1977) was used. In phase 1, the questionnaire compiled for use in the study was critiqued in a focus group meeting with representatives from seven key accounting firms. All survey items and the criteria for high performance were confirmed as relevant to the profession and four further items were added. These additional items are identified in Table 3.

The criteria for high performance were:

- high levels of client satisfaction with their work ;
- high levels of supervisor and colleague satisfaction with their work ; and



- delivery of projects on time and to a high standard.

The focus group members also provided names of accounting firms who could be approached for selecting 30 graduates. A target sample of thirty graduates from both regional and urban cities throughout New Zealand was set for this study. Approximately 80 Chartered Accountancy firms were contacted to identify graduates who were between 3 to 5 years out from graduation were identified as high performers by their supervisors. The large number of firms contacted to obtain the sample was a result of a comparatively low number of graduates in this category of time span remaining in New Zealand following graduation. A greater proportion of accounting graduates enter large Chartered Accountancy firms on completion of their degree and this is also reflected in the sample.

Two graduates, (one male and one female), and their workplace supervisors were interviewed individually in detail by the research team. For the four interviews a semi-structured interview schedule based on the study's capability and teaching and learning frameworks was used. The data generated were summarised and scrutinised by the research team. The purpose was to triangulate the outcomes from the focus group with respect to the survey items and to assist in further understanding the survey findings

In phase 2 an online survey instrument based on the results of phase one was used with 30 graduates and their supervisors. A good response rate to the online survey by the selected graduates was achieved because they were personally informed that they had been identified as a high performing graduate and asked to complete the survey by a senior staff member or partner.

The data gathering instrument, sample size, and response rate for both phases of the research program are summarised in Table One.

**Table One : Research Methodology**

Phase	Data Gathering Instrument	Sample Size Successful Graduates	Response Rate Successful Graduates	Sample Size Supervisors	Response Rate Supervisors
One	Semi-structured Interview Schedule	2	100%	2	100%
Two	On-line interview schedule	30	(n 26) 86%	26	(n 12) 46%

Table Two gives a profile of the graduates who participated in the study:

**Table Two : Profile of Participating Graduates**

Main areas of work in present position

Current work in Accounting	Financial statements	Auditing	Financial analysis	Taxation	Management accounting	Receiverships & liquidations	Other
most of work	(1)	(8)	0	(4)	0	0	
part of work	(10)		(1)	(6)	(2)	(1)	(0)

Current Job Title

Job Title	Consultant	Auditor	Accountant	Tax Manager or Consultant	Business Analyst	Other
(count)	(1)	(2)	(2)	(1)	(1)	
senior	(1)	(6)	(5)	(2)	(2)	(3)

Main degree which prepared graduate for present employment

Undergrad degree	Commerce / Accounting	Commerce Honours	Conjoint Commerce/Law	Conjoint Commerce/Arts	Conjoint Commerce/Science
(count)	(17)	(4)	(1)	(2)	(1)

University at which the undergraduate degree was completed

University at which UG degree was taken	Auckland	AUT	Canterbury	Massey	Otago	Victoria	Waikato
(count)	(2)	(3)	(2)	(4)	(7)	(2)	(6)

Geographical Area within New Zealand in which graduates are currently working

	Auckland	Wellington	Dunedin	Hamilton	Tauranga
(count)	(14)	(5)	(3)	(3)	(1)

Table Three summarises the items which were generated from the study's Phase One interviews, checked against equivalent research and then used in the Phase Two Online Survey. These items have been sorted into five capability scales and one educational quality scale and relate directly to our research aims and frameworks.

Respondents were asked to rate each of these items first, on their importance to successful professional practice and second, on the extent to which the university at which they studied had addressed them (performance). They were then invited to explain their ratings and suggest ways of improving undergraduate learning, assessment and support programmes.

**Table Three : Online Survey Scales**

**Professional Capability**

<p><b>Emotional Intelligence : Personal</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Being willing to face and learn from my errors and listen openly to feedback</li> <li>2. Understanding my personal strengths &amp; limitations</li> <li>3. Being confident to take calculated risks and take on new projects</li> <li>4. Being able to remain calm under pressure or when things go wrong</li> <li>5. Having the ability to defer judgement and not to jump in too quickly to resolve a problem</li> <li>6. A willingness to persevere when things are not working out as anticipated</li> <li>7. Wanting to produce as good a job as possible</li> <li>8. Being willing to take responsibility for projects, including how they turn out</li> <li>9. Having an ability to make a hard decision</li> <li>10. A willingness to pitch in and undertake menial tasks when needed</li> <li>11. Having a sense of humour and being able to keep work in perspective</li> <li>29. <i>Having the courage and persistence to follow a course of action to its conclusion</i></li> </ol> <p><b>Emotional Intelligence : Interpersonal</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>12. The ability to empathise with and work productively with people from a wide range of backgrounds</li> <li>13. A willingness to listen to different points of view before coming to a decision</li> <li>14. Being able to develop and use networks of colleagues to help me solve key workplace problems</li> <li>15. Understanding how the different groups that make up my organisation operate and how much influence they have in different situations</li> <li>16. Being able to work with senior staff without being intimidated</li> <li>17. Being able to give constructive feedback to work colleagues and others without engaging in personal blame</li> <li>18. Being able to motivate others to achieve great things</li> <li>19. Being able to develop and contribute positively to team-based projects</li> </ol> <p><b>Note : Items 29, 30, 41 and 42 in italics were included in the Accounting surveys after consultation with New Zealand accounting professionals.</b></p>	<p><b>Intellectual Capability</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>20. Knowing that there is never a fixed set of steps for solving workplace problems or carrying out a project</li> <li>21. Being able to identify from a mass of detail the core issue in any situation</li> <li>22. The ability to use previous experience to figure out what is going on when a current situation takes an unexpected turn</li> <li>23. Being able to diagnose what is really causing a problem and then to test this out in action</li> <li>24. An ability to trace out and assess the consequences of alternative courses of action and, from this, pick the one most suitable</li> <li>25. Being able to readjust a plan of action in the light of what happens as it is implemented</li> <li>26. Being able to see how apparently unconnected activities are linked and make up an overall picture</li> <li>27. Being able to set and justify priorities</li> <li>28. An ability to recognise patterns in a complex situation</li> <li>30. <i>Being able to understand and respond to client requirements in a timely manner</i></li> </ol> <p><b>Profession-Specific Skills &amp; Knowledge</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>31. Having a high level of current technical expertise relevant to my work area</li> <li>36. Understanding the role of risk management and litigation in current professional work</li> <li>39. Understanding how organisations like my current one operate</li> <li>41. <i>Having an understanding of the current issues in my professional field.</i></li> <li>42. <i>An ability to communicate and sell a range of services offered by the firm according (or tailored) to the needs of the client.</i></li> </ol> <p><b>Generic Skills &amp; Knowledge</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>32. Being able to use IT effectively to communicate and perform key work functions</li> <li>33. Being able to manage my own ongoing professional learning and development</li> <li>34. An ability to chair and participate constructively in meetings</li> <li>35. Being able to make effective presentations to clients</li> <li>37. Knowing how to manage projects into successful implementation</li> <li>38. An ability to help others learn in the workplace</li> <li>40. Being able to organise my work and manage time effectively</li> </ol>
--	---

**Educational Quality**

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>43. Focus more directly on the capabilities identified as being important in university courses and assessment</li> <li>44. Use real life workplace problems identified by successful graduates as a key resource for learning</li> <li>45. Make work placements which test out the capabilities identified in this study a key focus in each course</li> <li>46. Use successful graduates more consistently as a learning resource in university courses</li> <li>47. Decrease the amount of formal classroom teaching of basic technical skills and use self instructional guides and IT to develop these</li> <li>48. Include learning experiences based on real life case studies that specifically develop the interpersonal and personal skills needed in my particular profession</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>49. When relevant, use IT to make learning as convenient and interactive as possible</li> <li>50. Ensure that all teaching staff model the key attributes identified as being important in this study</li> <li>51. Ensure that teaching staff have current workplace experience</li> <li>52. Make assessment more real world and problem based and less focused on memorising factual material</li> <li>53. Use performance on the capabilities identified as being most important in earlier parts of this survey as the focus for assessment and feedback on all learning tasks</li> </ol>
--	---

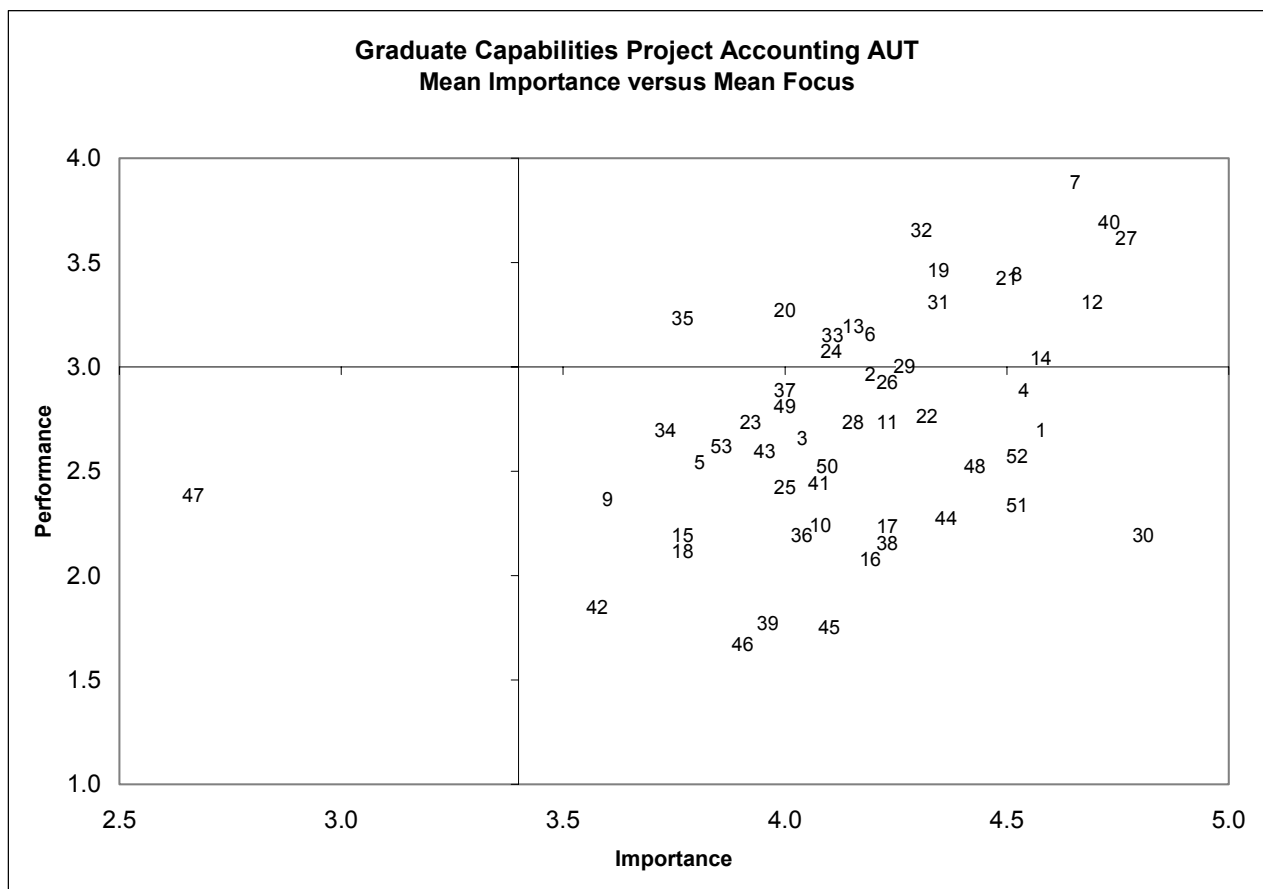
## THE RESULTS

Diagram Two presents a scatter graph of the mean ratings on importance and performance allocated to each of the items in Table 3 by the selected graduates who responded to the Online Survey.

The diagram shows the mean rating given by respondents on the:

- importance of each item for their successful professional practice ;
- the extent to which the university at which the respondent studied had addressed that item (performance).

**Diagram Two**



Items high on importance and high on performance represent areas of good practice (the north-eastern quarter of Diagram Two). Items high on importance but low on performance (the south-

eastern quarter of Diagram Two) identify potential areas for enhancement or follow-up. Items in the western sectors raise issues of relevance.

These quantitative results have been complemented by a thematic analysis of the extensive qualitative data generated during the interviews in Phase One and from graduate comments on their ratings in the Online Survey.

### Professional Capability

#### Top 15 Professional Capability Items - ranked by importance

(Respondents rated this based on “importance of this capability for successful performance in my current professional work”)

Importance Ranking	Focus Ranking	Category	Item
1.	45	Intellectual	30 <i>Being able to understand and respond to client requirements in a timely manner</i>
2.	4	Intellectual	27 Being able to set and justify priorities
3.	2	Generic	40 Being able to organise my work and manage time effectively
4.	8	Interpersonal	12 The ability to empathise with and work productively with people from a wide range of backgrounds
5.	1	Personal	7 Wanting to produce as good a job as possible
6.	27	Personal	1 Being willing to face and learn from my errors and listen openly to feedback
7.	16	Interpersonal	14 Being able to develop and use networks of colleagues to help me solve key workplace problems
8.	20	Personal	4 Being able to remain calm under pressure or when things go wrong
9.	5	Personal	8 Being willing to take responsibility for projects, including how they turn out
10.	7	Intellectual	21 Being able to identify from a mass of detail the core issue in any situation
11.	6	Interpersonal	19 Being able to develop and contribute positively to team-based projects
12.	9	Profession-specific	31 Having a high level of current technical expertise to my work area
13.	23	Intellectual	22 The ability to use previous experience to figure out what is going on when a current situation takes an unexpected turn
14.	3	Generic	32 Being able to use IT effectively to communicate and perform key work functions
15.	17	Personal	29 <i>Having the courage and persistence to follow a course of action to its conclusion</i>

Eight out of the top fifteen ranked items relate to personal or interpersonal capabilities, four are intellectual and only one is concerned with technical expertise. They relate to the management of self and work and to working with others.

Nine of those top fifteen items are also in the top fifteen on the rankings of extent to which the university course focused on this ability. This confirms that universities are seeking to focus on the development of their students professional capabilities

Some graduates and supervisors questioned whether personal and interpersonal capabilities could be taught in a university setting. Some could point to attempts in their courses to require students to do group work and presentations. Most graduates felt there should be more attention to working in teams and developing interpersonal skills.

Graduate participants commented :

*The group-based work at University aimed to develop the interpersonal aspects to a high level. This is critical in my work*

*Main theme here is interpersonal requirements of my work environment. My university courses had a limited amount of group work. The balance should be more towards group work than individual. There is very little work I do now on my own. Interpersonal skills are very important*

*University has provided a very sound platform for technical growth and using IT for client support/service/. However, university does not really deal with project management, mentoring, or workflow management or client meetings/interaction.*

*The key strength of the University I went to was the emphasis on team-work, presentations and interpersonal skills. Although IT skills are critical they should not devalue the interpersonal skills which I believe are more important*

Top 10 Professional Capability Items - ranked by focus in university courses

(Respondents rated this based on “extent to which my university course focused on this ability”)

Focus Ranking	Importance Ranking	Category	Item
1	5	Personal	7 Wanting to produce as good a job as possible
2	3	Generic	40 Being able to organise my work and manage time effectively
3	18	Generic	32 Being able to use IT effectively to communicate & perform key work functions
4	2	Intellectual	27 Being able to set and justify priorities
5	11	Personal	8 Being willing to take responsibility for projects, including how they turn out
6	15	Inter-personal	19 Being able to develop and contribute positively to team-based projects
7	12	Intellectual	21 Being able to identify from a mass of detail the core issue in any situation
8	4	Inter-personal	12 The ability to empathise with and work productively with people from a wide range of backgrounds
9	16	Profession-specific	31 Having a high level of current technical expertise to my work area
10	37	Intellectual	20 Knowing that there is never a fixed set of steps for solving workplace problems or carrying out a project

Graduate participants agreed that university courses did make a contribution to development of professional capabilities, but could do better. Only four of the top ten capabilities focused on in university courses are in the top 10 in importance to successful performance in professional work. This suggests that there is an opportunity for further development when the study programmes are reviewed.



### Lowest 5 Professional Capability Items - ranked by focus in university course

Focus Ranking	Importance Ranking	Category	Item
47	23	Generic	38 An ability to help others learn in the workplace
48	48	Interpersonal	18 Being able to motivate others to achieve great things
49	26	Interpersonal	16 Being able to work with senior staff without being intimidated
50	52	Profession-specific	42 <i>An ability to communicate and sell a range of services offered by the firm according (or tailored) to the needs of the client.</i>
51	41	Profession-specific	39 Understanding how organisations like my current one operate

The graduate participants are clearly questioning the effectiveness of learning and assessment strategies to develop teamwork skills. What is unclear from these findings is whether there was a lack of learning activities involving teamwork, or rather a lack of focus on assessing teamwork skills in learning activities undertaken.

Graduate participants commented:

*University tends to have prescribed black and white answers whereas in practise we start with grey and work our way to black or white. This involves professional judgment, action planning, flexibility to modify the action plan, a dynamic and more integrated approach to solving problems. University does not cater to this particularly well.*

*I don't know how you would teach it - but the ability to take responsibility for a job and put the effort in to complete a task in a timely manner is SO important. A real lesson to learn is that if the task were straight-forward, chances are the client wouldn't need us to perform it.*

*When things go wrong you need to be able to adapt and fix the situation. This tests professional capability as clients come to us most of the time when they do not know the answers and we are expected to provide them with the answers based on our professional skills.*

*As a practitioner you are most challenged when things are going wrong. Things can go wrong for a number of reasons, in and out of our control, and the test is whether you are capable enough to deal with changes and problems as they occur while still achieving client objectives.*

*Generally at work when things go wrong it is because of time pressures to get advice to a client. It is very difficult to stay cool and calm in this situation especially when dealing with more junior staff who do not have the same sense of urgency.*

*'...in practice there is a strong focus on judgment, handling pressure, and being confident enough to take on new projects, ...'*

*As a manager it is amazing how very bright people (i.e. people with very good grades at university) start as graduates and cannot apply themselves to their jobs. I feel the lack of practical/real world knowledge gained at university is a concern and is something that should certainly be incorporated into a degree at university. I also feel that university should assist graduates in understanding the type of work they could undertake when they leave university – and the use of successful graduates as guest speakers would I believe be invaluable.*

## **Educational Quality**

In considering how universities could improve courses, the graduates wanted learning that was 'real-life', practical and relevant to New Zealand, taught by academic staff with current experience. Another strong theme was the need for presentations, group work, and framing and solving problems in uncertain and ambiguous situations.

### Top 5 Education Quality Items - ranking in importance

(Participants rated this based on the “importance of this strategy in making learning relevant, interesting and engaging”)

Importance Ranking Overall	Use / Focus Ranking	Item
9	40	51 Ensure that teaching staff have current workplace experience
10	32	52 Make assessment more real-world and problem-based and less focused on memorising factual material
13	34	48 Include learning experiences based on real-life case studies that specifically develop the interpersonal and personal skills needed in my particular profession
14	41	44 Use real-life workplace problems identified by successful graduates as a key resource for learning
32	35	50 Ensure that all teaching staff model the key attributes identified as being important in this study

Participants generally gave low rankings to the performance of universities in effectively using relevant and interesting learning strategies. The highest ranked item on performance was 32 out of 53 items. The main issue for graduates was lack of real life, practical relevance in their learning. It is also possible that concerns at the lack of focus by universities on item 48 influenced the focus ratings on the remaining 4 items.

### Lowest 5 Educational quality items - ranked by effective use / focus in university courses

(Participants rated this based on the “extent to which my university course used this strategy effectively”)

Use / Focus Ranking Overall	Importance Ranking	Item
38	53	47 Decrease the amount of formal classroom teaching of basic technical skills and use self-instructional guides and IT to develop these
40	9	51 Ensure that teaching staff have current workplace experience
41	14	44 Use real-life workplace problems identified by successful graduates as a key resource for learning
52	31	45 Make work-placements which test out the capabilities identified in this study a key focus in each course
53	44	46 Use successful graduates more consistently as a learning resource in university courses (e.g. as guest speakers)

The most significant finding with the educational quality items is the significant discrepancy between the importance of and focus of each item.

Graduate participants commented:

*Universities must include more team work and presentation skills in classes, in addition to focusing classes on real examples and case studies. More discussion is required.*

*Have more case studies on real life New Zealand situations. Use successful graduates as guest speakers etc. Have part of the course being based around a work placement. Encourage team skills and presentations*

*...concentrating on real life case studies and scenarios that are relevant to the workplace i.e. real work place examples*

*Practical application of the skills acquired and ability to look beyond the simple answer to understand why something is the way it is and not just take it as it is.*

*The work experience component of the degree was probably the most relevant, it gave you the opportunity to experience everything first hand and put the theory learnt into practice*

A supervisor commented :

*Ability to work with others and learn from each other is important. When recruiting I am often surprised at the lack of team based opportunities for students studying accounting.*

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

This study has highlighted the importance of personal and interpersonal emotional intelligence, and intellectual capability skill development in tertiary accounting programmes. This confirms that professional success requires far more than the possession of a high level of technical expertise.

The results suggest that universities have heeded the recommendations for the reform of accounting education by also focusing on professional skill development, but they also suggest there is room for improvement. Two key areas for improvement relate to teamwork and, the application of learning to real world situations.

### **Teamwork**

Given the apparent reluctance of students to undertake work which is not assessed we clearly need to place more emphasis on the development of learning and assessment strategies which promote and encourage teamwork. Contingent on this is the development of assessment strategies which identify the professional capability skills required to be demonstrated in team-based activities and then establishing a basis for assessing each student individually against this prescribed skill set.

### **Real-World Learning**

A further clear signal received is the desire to work with real-world problems. Possible solutions to this problem are:

- to develop a learning strategy which is case study based,
- integrate co-operative/work placement activities into the study programme

The benefits of these learning strategies, are that students are encouraged to assimilate and integrate data from multiple disciplines and perspectives while at the same time placing the accounting discipline in *context*. Then and only then may we start to discourage our students from

fragmenting the curriculum with a resulting reluctance to draw on the pre-requisite knowledge of other topics and courses.

Such strategies has been successfully implemented at the Auckland University of Technology with the development of Integrated Business Modules (Gerbic P & McConchie A, 2001) in the first year, and the inclusion of a mandatory final year module; Co-operative Education, in the Bachelor of Business degree. Other examples are the use of a case study based approach to learning, in the introductory accounting courses at the University of Auckland (Teixeira, 2003) and the University of Western Australia (Coram 2002). Further evidence of support for this type of initiative is provided by CPA Australia with the development of a video series for use in introductory accounting courses.

The major findings of this study should be viewed in the light of two key limitations, first the small number of participants in the study and second that the participants are limited to those employed by Chartered Accountants in Public Practice.

Despite the large number of recent accounting graduates employed by Chartered Accountants in Public Practice in New Zealand, three years of professional practice often coincides with the completion of the practical practice and professional competence requirements for admission to the Institute and many high performing graduates upon admission commence their overseas experience at this point in time. As a consequence, difficulty was encountered in recruiting more than 30 participants within this sector.

A further study is proposed for recent graduates employed in the corporate sector to ascertain whether the perception of these graduates and their supervisors differs significantly from those employed in public practice.

## **OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

Anecdotal evidence from student evaluations of lecturers and courses would suggest that graduates with professional practice experience have a greater appreciation of the benefits of professional skill development in their tertiary education than do current students. This suggests that a longitudinal study may be appropriate to identify how and when participants expectations of their tertiary accounting programmes change. In so doing we may be better able to communicate expected programme outcomes with our students.

## REFERENCES

- Accounting Education Change Commission [AECC], (1990) Objectives of Education for Accountants: Position Statement Number One, *Issues in Accounting Education*, Vol 5 No 2, pp 307 - 312.
- Adler R & M Milne (1998) The Challenges of Learner-Centred Education, *Chartered Accountants Journal*, Feb 1998, pp 12 – 17.
- Albrecht WS & RJ Sack (2000), Accounting Education: Charting the Course Through a Perilous Future, *Accounting Education Series Volume 16*, American Accounting Association.
- American Accounting Association (1986), Future Accounting Education: Preparing for the Expanding Profession [Bedford Committee], *Issues in Accounting Education*, Spring, pp 169 - 195.
- Arthur Andersen & Co, Arthur Young, Coopers & Lybrand, Deloitte Haskins & Sells, Ernst & Whinney, Peat Marwick Main & Co, Price Waterhouse & Touche Ross [The Big Eight], (1989) Perspectives on Education: Capabilities for Success in the Accounting Profession
- Coram P, (2002) Accounting for Non-Accountants: A Case Study in Preaching to the Unconverted, AAANZ 2002 Annual Conference, Perth.
- Elmore R F, (1979) 'Backward mapping'; implementation research and policy decisions, *Political Science Quarterly*, 94(4): 601-616.
- Gerbic P & McConchie A: (2001) in MacFarlane B & Ottwill R (eds) Effective Learning and Teaching in Practice in Business and Management, Kogan Page, London.
- Gardner, H (1995): Leading Minds, Basic Books, New York
- Goleman, D (1998): Working with Emotional Intelligence, Bloomsbury, London.
- Gonczi, A, Hager, P & Oliver, L (1999): Establishing Competency Based Standards for the Professions, NOOSR, DETYA.
- Morgan, G (1988): Riding the Waves of Change: Managerial competencies for a turbulent world, Jossey Bass, San Francisco
- Parlett & Dearden, (1977) Introduction to illuminative evaluation, *Studies in Higher Education Series*, Pacific Soundings Press, California
- Schön, D (1983): The Reflective Practitioner, Basic Books, New York .



Scott G, (1996) Change, competence & education in Ryan, G (Ed): Learner Assessment & Program Evaluation, APLN, Sydney, Chapter 6 (pp 75-107)

Scott G & W Yates (2002) Using successful Graduates to Improve the quality of Undergraduate Engineering Programs, UTS, Sydney

Scott, G, Yates, W & Wilson, D (2001): Tracking and profiling successful graduates, UTS, Sydney

Sundem G L (1999) The Accounting Education Change Commission: Its History and Impact, American Accounting Association, Accounting Education Series, Vol 15.

Teixeira A, (2003) Improving Student Perceptions and Retention: Re-engineering the first course in accounting through context based learning, University of Auckland.

Tennant M, (1991) Expertise as a dimension of adult development, *New Education*, 13(2) 49-56.