

Property into the next millennium: The future of property education in Australia

Dr David Parker
Visiting Professor, Henley Business School
University of Reading

Abstract

This paper summarises the keynote presentation given by Dr David Parker at the 29th PRRES Conference in Sydney in January 2023. Dr Parker was one of the founding members of PRRES and was a Board member for many years, including terms as President, Executive Director, and Editor of the Pacific Rim Property Research Journal.

Dr Parker reflects on 20 years of evolution in property education in Australia, as evidenced in two PRRES monographs published in 2000 and 2011, together with his current thoughts on the future of property education in 2023.

Introduction

In many ways, property education in 2023 is very similar to property education in 2000. Change has occurred over two decades, but it has been slow, incremental, and limited compared to the extent of change occurring in the property professions and the property industry.

To mark the millennium, in 1999 PRRES commissioned a forward-looking monograph, *Property into the next millennium* (Parker (Ed), 2000) comprising ten invited papers addressing a wide range of future scenarios including culture, equity, debt, China, IT and options as well as education.

In 2011, PRRES commissioned a monograph to record the papers given at a symposium on the future of property education hosted by the University of South Australia on 5 August 2011, entitled *The future of property education in Australia* (Parker (Ed), 2011). The papers addressed a wide range of issues including the global higher education market, education for professions and property education in Australia, wherein Armytage (2011) identified 13 universities offering property degrees. By 2023, two universities (the University of Queensland and the University of Sunshine Coast) had ceased to offer property degrees, while TAFE NSW now offers a property degree.

This paper seeks to summarise the conclusions of the two monographs, with observations on the extent to which change hypothesised therein has occurred, together with thoughts on the future of property education in 2023.

Property into the next millennium (Parker (Ed), 2000)

Of the ten invited papers in the monograph *Property into the next millennium* (Parker (Ed), 2000), three are of particular interest from the viewpoint of education:

- Chapter 1 *Introduction* (Parker, 2000)
- Chapter 4 *Investing in yourself: career management in the 21st century*
 (Hamilton, 2000)
- Chapter 6 *Educating the property professional of tomorrow* (Boyd, 2000)

In the *Introduction*, Parker (2000) summarised the wider forces of change in property in the next millennium, hypothesised in the monograph, to include:

- the illiquidity of property vanquished;
- the framework of property markets fundamentally changed by demographic change;
- the transformation of professional practice through the cyber revolution;
- the metamorphosis of the nature of property services provision;
- the dominance of capital management over property market fundamentals;
- the ascendancy of China as the world’s largest property market, property industry and property profession;
- a totally new concept of the professional career;
- the subjugation of the property valuation discipline into the finance school;
- the implementation of a multi-participant approach to the provision of property education for a disaggregated student body; and
- the empowerment of the individual with the ascendancy of lifestyle. (Parker, 2000)

While the subsequent 20 years have seen most of the hypothesised changes occur in part, only the empowerment of the individual with the ascendancy of lifestyle may be contended to have been fully realised with significant impacts on the office, retail, logistics and residential property markets.

In *Investing in yourself: career management in the 21st century*, Hamilton (2000) hypothesised future changes in career management to include:

- formal qualification being assumed and becoming a minor part of the career management process;
- the career as a series of 5 yearly associations to the age of 50, with 10-20 years of consulting/contracting thereafter; and
- individuals becoming highly flexible and transient, placing emphasis on specialisms, lifelong learning, lifestyle and taking control of their own lives.

Consistent with the empowerment of the individual with the ascendancy of lifestyle having been realised, Hamilton's hypothesised future changes have also been realised with the passage of two decades seeing people skills usurp technical skills for advancement, the emergence of the academic degree as an as of right credential and the preferences of the employee subverting the preferences of the employer in the employment relationship.

In *Educating the property professional of tomorrow*, Boyd (2000) undertook a SWOT analysis of Universities and professional Associations, concluding that:

- Universities don't communicate with professionals in the marketplace to ensure that demand is being met, being under threat from other education providers; and
- Associations are not positioned as educators and their reliance on volunteers is inadequate for a comprehensive learning environment.

Two decades on, Boyd's conclusions still largely hold true, such as graduates of property courses within universities losing ground in the property funds management sector to graduates of finance courses and private education providers making inroads into the popular and, therefore, lucrative property education sector. Similarly, practitioner volunteers still predominate in education provision by Associations and the challenge of "not knowing what you don't know" continues to constrain the quality of the education product delivered.

Boyd (2000) proposed a *learning environment for the property industry of tomorrow* (p51) that incorporated three parties: being universities, professional associations, and educationalists. Significantly, universities and professional associations would be responsible for course outline and design, while the educationalists would be responsible for content preparation and subject delivery, and all three would evaluate it.

Further, Boyd (2000) envisaged the Educationalist as being:

- a trained educator who has relevant industry experience;
- an instructional specialist with higher qualifications in teaching and learning;
- focusing on instructional design, content preparation, subject delivery, and evaluation; and
- working with but may or may not be associated with the university or Association.

Essentially, Boyd's proposed model envisaged the transfer of teaching (content preparation and course delivery) to a professional specialist so releasing the time of academic staff for research. It may be contended that, twenty years on, though Boyd's educationalist has not yet come to pass, the need for same is as great as or greater than it was 20 years ago.

Additionally, Boyd (2000) contemplated two categories of property students in the future, being:

- school leavers – for whom a two-year generic course and two-year property specialist course would comprise a degree; and
- practitioners – for whom self-directed learning would be preferred.

The trend across Australian property degrees to generic undergraduate first year subjects with property subjects added in years two and three effectively moves towards fulfilling Boyd's contemplation, as does the popularity of online courses among mature age students and practitioners.

It may be concluded that, whilst society has generally moved in the directions hypothesised 20 years ago, Australian university property courses have only partially moved in the directions hypothesised though, ironically, the need for the changes hypothesised 20 years ago remains as strong if not stronger today.

The future of property education in Australia (Parker (Ed), 2011)

The contextual themes and key issues arising from the symposium on *The future of property education in Australia*, hosted by the University of South Australia on 5 August 2011, were summarised in the first chapter (Parker, 2011) of the PRRES monograph *The future of property education in Australia* (Parker (Ed), 2011).

The hypothesis for exploration at the symposium was that property education in Australia may be at a crossroads, with current university undergraduate property programs having evolved to supply trained employees for the property profession, including property valuers, managers and agents, following a curriculum for accreditation codified by professional bodies which may meet neither the requirements of the broader property industry (comprising a diverse range of roles beyond those of the property profession) nor the senior management of universities seeking to implement Federal Government education policy

Parker (2011) identified four contextual themes arising from the symposium, being:

- the commercialisation of the university sector;
- the Bradley report;
- the role of research; and
- the contribution of the professional body accreditation process.

Concerning the commercialisation of the university sector, Parker (2011) noted:

- educational massification, being more of the population becoming tertiary educated;
- a shift from a process-focused culture to an outcome-focused culture;
- a business model based on efficiency, effectiveness, value for money, marketable product and image creation, rather than social and public good;

- key metrics being student recruitment, comparative entry scores, pass rates, graduate employment rates, overseas revenue, research grants and brand impact, rather than a contribution to the intellectual capital of the nation;
- a low-cost, highly casualised academic staff base;
- the reliance on international students;
- the development of convergent, homogenous products (programs), adapted, packaged and delivered for customer (student) satisfaction with a focus on high-demand, high-margin products where sales volumes may be maximised (student enrolments) while the cost of production (academic staff) may be minimised; and
- Universities and property courses being required to adapt to commercialisation for survival or face financial unviability.

Ten years on, despite the temporary incursion of COVID-19, the commercialisation of the university sector may be contended to be continuing in broadly the same direction with the need for property courses to adapt to commercialisation for survival or face financial unviability continuing.

Concerning the Bradley Report (2008), Parker (2011) noted that the report:

- focussed on getting more, smarter, better-trained people into the workforce;
- made 46 recommendations including targets, a demand-driven funding model and a national regulatory framework; and
- popularised the notion of an entitlement to a degree.

Ten years on, successive Governments have shifted the emphasis of education policy but the generally lower academic entry requirements for property courses have made them vulnerable to enrolment by students who have the notion of an entitlement to a degree rather than an ability to complete a degree.

Concerning the role of research, Parker (2011) noted that:

- the Bradley Report was expected to focus the debate on what is a university compared to the VET sector;
- the creation and dissemination of knowledge was seen as a defining feature of a university;
- a focus on research performance, relevance, translation into innovation and links with teaching and graduate outcomes was anticipated; and
- the property industry sought thought leadership from property academia within a research agenda that sought to challenge existing knowledge, reshape previous paradigms, and develop new decision-making tools.

Perhaps, ten years on, it is in research that property academia has faced its greatest challenges. Raising funding for research that is of relevance to the property discipline has proved very difficult, leading to academics undertaking research for which funding may be available but for which direct relevance to the property discipline may be constrained.

Finally, concerning the contribution of the professional body accreditation process, Parker (2011) noted:

- prescriptive specificity in professional body accreditation requirements rather than an outcome-focus with an emphasis on research; and
- specialist property units being squeezed between first year generic socialisation units and final year non-property skills, soft skills, and industry engagement units.

While this tension was contended to be a potential problem as universities continued to seek greater standardisation which professional bodies may not be willing to accept, ten years on such a tension remains but has not yet resulted in confrontation.

Parker (2011) identified six key issues arising from the symposium, being:

- adequacy of financial returns;
- delivery;
- students;
- staffing;
- research focus; and
- stakeholder disconnect and misalignment.

Concerning the adequacy of financial returns, the issue for property was contended to be whether class sizes in property are uneconomic. Providing a range of specialist subjects to relatively small numbers of students is inconsistent with the commercialisation theme identified above. Concerning delivery, the issues for property were contended to be the role of distance delivery and the blurring of the boundary with the VET sector, as subsequently evidenced by the ability of the VET sector in NSW to award a property degree.

Issues concerning students were contended to include the focus on qualification rather than education (being the notion of entitlement to a degree certificate without necessarily having to do the work required to be entitled to same), the maturation requirements of contemporary students (with university replacing the previous role of high school) and sections of the property industry not requiring a property degree.

Concerning staffing, Parker (2011) noted the issues of an ageing staff profile and the difficulty faced by universities in recruiting appropriately skilled and experienced staff. Issues concerning research focus were contended to include, as referred to above, the challenge for property in embracing the research imperative and the challenge in delivering research

considered relevant and timely by the property industry which also manifest in the issue of stakeholder disconnect and misalignment.

The conclusions for property programs drawn by Parker (2011) included the discomfort facing property programs from commercialisation and financial return pressures and the tension between the prescriptive specificity of accreditation and the university focus on research and thought leadership, supporting the hypothesis that property education in Australia may be at a crossroads.

It may be contended that, ten years on, property education is still at the crossroads with the issues previously identified being contended to still exist with, effectively, limited change over the decade.

Thoughts on the future of property education in 2023

As many of the issues identified in 2000 and 2011 continue to be applicable, it may be contended that additions from a 2023 perspective may include:

- the quality of student entry becoming increasingly variable;
- the student focus shifting from the role of a degree being to gain knowledge to the role being to make the student feel good, with a resultant impact on willingness to study;
- increasing pressure on academic staff to pass students, especially international students; and
- the impact on students and Universities of COVID-19 and the woke culture movement.

The current situation may continue for months, years or another decade, pending a catalyst for change. Such a catalyst may be:

- University policy changes with a closer focus on profitability emerging;
- that demand for graduates by the property industry (as opposed to the property profession) is not fulfilled;
- that demand for property valuers decreases as technology and AI continue to further impact property valuation; and/or
- University relationships with the property profession deteriorate as ageing, long-serving academic staff retire.

It is within the remit of property academia to propose a structured response to the issues facing property courses at universities across Australia. Such a response may include a greater role for VET courses in training valuers, property managers and agents which would largely remove the need for accreditation of degree courses by professional associations.

Relieved of the need to meet professional body requirements for valuation, property management and agency accreditation, property academics could redesign property degrees

to meet the requirements of the broader property industry (rather than the property profession) and of university management.

Going further, the involvement of Boyd's Educationalists may then allow property academic staff to become primarily focused on research and contract management, which would align them more closely with the focus of university management.

Change in property education over the last twenty years has been slow, incremental and limited, in the absence of a major catalyst to force change. However, over the last two decades, two universities (the University of Queensland and the University of Sunshine Coast) had ceased to offer property degrees, while TAFE NSW now offers a property degree. While it is challenging to contemplate any State not offering at least one property degree, for those that currently have multiple providers the risk facing the weaker providers appears greater.

While it may be challenging for academic staff in those universities offering property courses to identify what the major catalyst for change may be, being aware that same may occur allows for a level of risk management to be maintained appropriate to each university.

References

- Armytage, L (2011) *Property education in Australia: 13 shades of grey?*, chapter 6 in Parker, D (Ed) (2011) *The future of property education in Australia*, PRRES and University of South Australia, Sydney
- Bradley, D (2008) *Review of Australian higher education*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra
- Boyd, T (2000) *Educating the property professional of tomorrow*, chapter 6 in Parker D (Ed) (2000) *Property into the next millennium*, PRRES and RICS Research Foundation, Sydney
- Hamilton, G (2000) *Investing in yourself: career management in the 21st century*, chapter 4 in Parker D (Ed) (2000) *Property into the next millennium*, PRRES and RICS Research Foundation, Sydney
- Parker, D (Ed) (2000) *Property into the next millennium*, PRRES and RICS Research Foundation, Sydney
- Parker, D (2000) *Introduction*, chapter 1 in Parker D (Ed) (2000) *Property into the next millennium*, PRRES and RICS Research Foundation, Sydney
- Parker, D (Ed) (2011) *The future of property education in Australia*, PRRES and University of South Australia, Sydney
- Parker, D (2011) *Property education in Australia: themes and issues*, chapter 1 in Parker D (Ed) (2011) *The future of property education in Australia*, PRRES and University of South Australia, Sydney