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PEERING UNDERNEATH MATS OF REGULATION: PREPARING PRACTITIONERS IN HEALTH AND BUSINESS PROGRAMS
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Abstract

The process of professionalisation involves a shift from individual notions of good practice to its codification, with measures of competency, appointment of gatekeepers and surveillance strategies developed to ensure that standards are maintained (Pitman 2012). This regulatory environment is shaping curriculum development in university programs preparing students for professional practice. The ‘making’ of a professional practice subject has been the concern of various critiques of professional development programs including McWilliams (2002, p. 298) who argues for greater scrutiny of the sort of knowledge that is coming to count as worthwhile for all professionals, including academics, and the current proliferation of mechanisms for disseminating this knowledge. Fenwick (2009) challenges the conceptions of learning underpinning professional development programs arguing that these are problematic, “literally ‘making’ a particular professional subject that is atomised and conservative” (p. 229).

Similar concerns can be flagged in regard to preparatory education for professional practice and the conforming professional subjects being produced. In this paper we focus on a preliminary study of undergraduate professional education across six health and business professions at an Australian university. We juxtapose the ways course leaders in accounting, human resource management, marketing, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and speech pathology represent their curriculum in course documents with how they talk about their individual professions and how they believe that the curriculum in their institution prepares students for professional practice. More specifically, we explore a continuum of visibilities in course documents and six ‘curriculum narratives’ (Gough 1993) constructed by course leaders about preparing professional practitioners for professions - professions that are at different stages of professionalisation (Evetts 2012; Pitman 2012).

Desired characteristics of graduates and of learning to become a practitioner in each profession along with aspects of each course seen as being critical to professional practice, and events regarded as most influential in producing the envisaged graduate were identified in interviews with the six course leaders. Points of distinction, how these then shape profession-specific teaching and learning and how students become socialised into their intended profession also surfaced in the course of group and individual interviews. The value of this comparative study lies in the opportunity to trace, in a comparative way, how the presence or absence of regulation produces visible and less visible knowledges and practices.

The metaphor ‘peering underneath mats’ refers to performing a revelatory action related to the preparation of professional practitioners. Imagine lifting ‘mats’ of regulations that have been put over and perhaps sedimented onto the figure of a profession. What might become visible?
Introduction

Processes of professionalisation involve a shift from individual notions of good practice to its codification, with measures of competency, appointment of gatekeepers and surveillance strategies developed to ensure that standards are maintained (Pitman 2012). This is the regulatory environment that is shaping curriculum development in university programs preparing students for professional practice.

The ‘making’ of a professional practice subject has been the concern of various critiques of professional development programs including McWilliams (2002, p. 298) who argues for greater scrutiny of the sort of knowledge that is coming to count as worthwhile for all professionals, including academics, and the current proliferation of mechanisms for disseminating this knowledge. Conceptions of learning that underpin professional development programs are challenged by Fenwick (2009) who argues that these are problematic, “literally ‘making’ a particular professional subject that is atomised and conservative” (p. 229). Similar concerns can be flagged in regard to preparatory education for professional practice and the conforming professional subjects being produced.

In this paper we present discussion of a selection of issues surfaced in a recent study conducted to explore preparation for professional practice across six undergraduate programs across health and business in an Australian regional university. Course leaders were interviewed and a range of documents analysed. We chose to examine courses at different stages of professionalisation, with and without accreditation, regulation, and registration requirements, with both similarities and differences in curriculum content.

The inspirations for this comparative study exploring both similarities and differences in teaching and practice of a variety of professions were studies first by Grossman (2009) and second by Schulman (2005). A recent landmark comparative study of preparation for relational practices in the clergy, teaching and clinical psychology (Grossman et al, 2009). In this research, Pam Grossman and her colleagues (2009) identified representations (representations of practice and what representations make visible to novices; decomposition (breaking down practice into parts) and approximations (opportunities to engage in activities more or less proximal to professional practice) as three key concepts of practice in the professions. And Schulman (2005) maintained ‘signature pedagogies’ are the forms of learning and teaching that shape the ways in which future practitioners are educated in preparation for three key areas of professional work – to think, to perform and to act with integrity. Schulman (2005) argued that since,

... individual professions adapt to their own signatures, which, however effective, are prone to inertia, we can learn a great deal by examining the signature pedagogies of a variety of professions and asking how they might improve teaching and learning in professions for which they are not now signatures (p. 58).
The intention was to design a study that would enable us to make unlikely comparisons, comparing preparation of professionals in speech pathology and accounting, for example. The research team also contained unlikely partnerships with S from occupational therapy and C from marketing. We believe that collaborating in unlikely partnerships can re-work predictable conversations about preparing professional practitioners and disrupt the taken for granted, creating spaces for productive collaboration and challenges to the way we think about teaching and learning in a range of professional areas at our own university work place. As researchers collaborating we had to unlearn our professional socializations and remove profession-specific blinkers in order to suspend judgement when interpreting the data.

A guiding question for this study is: what is it that becomes less visible/invisible during current processes of professionalisation? We use both selected fragments of regulatory documents stripped from the university-wide Course & Subject Information Management System (CASIMS) juxtaposed against interview data to illustrate how visible and less visible material enactments (Fenwick & Richards, 2011) are in play whenever work and learning practices are represented. Excerpts from regulatory course documents are juxtaposed with the talk of these course leaders negotiating human and non-human worlds everyday in their undergraduate health and business programs. The value of this comparative study lies in the opportunity to trace, in a comparative way, how the presence or absence of regulation produces visible and less visible enactments and practices.

The paper is organised in four sections. Firstly we look at autonomy, agency and regulation of the professions. Then, we provide background on a comparative study of six health and business undergraduate programs. This is followed by a discussion drawn from analysis of excerpts from regulatory course documents juxtaposed with the talk of course leaders. We conclude ways that students can ‘colour in’ a curriculum and note issues of identity, public profile and scope in professions at different stages of professionalisation. Further comparative research is suggested.

**Autonomy, agency and regulation in the professions**

The professions can be understood as ‘organised occupational groups with a (somewhat) accepted claim to legal and/or social status’ (Adams 2010, p. 54). In defining a contemporary occupation as a profession what appear to be central are organisation, status and the structuring of social relations (Adams, 2010). Professions develop with the vacating of jurisdictions; occupational groups become competitive causing inter-professional tensions (Abbott, 1988). Professional associations, from both established and aspiring professions are pursuing professionalising projects (Germov, 2005) designed to demarcate their boundaries of practice, establish occupational / social closure, regulating and surveilling members to greater or lesser extents.

The transition from individual notions of good practice to its codification are in tension with traditional views of professionalism that foreground autonomy, professional judgement and self-regulation. Professionals threatened by external regulation raise the loss of professional identity as an issue (McInnis 2011). Perhaps the long held understanding that professionals required a significant domain of discretion in
individual practice is past its ‘use by’ date? None of this political manoeuvring has much to do with the end users of professional services or with the greater/public good. Nevertheless, positioning issues of prestige and professional status inevitably come into play, contesting, jockeying.

Three perspectives on professionalisation are suggested by Sullivan (2000). The first, a project of collective mobility, focuses on control of the market based on the use by professionalising groups of claims for superior knowledge and special moral integrity. The second, emphasises cultural and social authority and how this is linked to progress in scientific and technical rationality in society. Expert knowledge, particularly scientific knowledge, confers legitimacy and prestige. The third approach emphasises professionalism as ‘an ideology … of social responsibility’ (p. 674), as a cultural and political development rather than a struggle among economic interests or an agent of the spread of techno-rationality.

An inward-looking profession may forget that professional status is actually something conferred by society (Cooper, 2012). Increasingly, professionals have a contract not just with their clients but also with government and society more broadly. Achieving public recognition and governmental sanction for the professional monopoly on a bounded domain of concern constitutes a necessary stage in a professionalising project, as do processes of differentiation from related or similar professions.

For example, because it is more tightly regulated, accounting, one of the six professions in our study, would be at one end of a continuum of professionalisation with marketing, as a less regulated field, at the other. In fact, the categorisation of marketing as a profession can be contested, as there is limited evidence of public recognition, government sanction and differentiation.

Issues raised by Public Relations interviewees in a 2010 case study by Stephen Matchett, editor of the Higher Education Supplement of The Australian may be relevant when considering the pros and cons of professionalising the related field of marketing. These included the vexed questions around practice, craft and theory, ethics and communication, naming a profession, scholarly standing, disciplinary identity and positioning, professional association’s attitude to university qualifications, accreditation and media stereotypes.

In work on the development of new professional knowledges in response to new challenges paramedics are dealing with Aberton & Slade (2012) remind us that rules and guidelines don’t cover everything. We are interested in the ‘in between spaces’ mapped by Solomon, Boud & Rooney (2006), in both regulatory documents and momentary, ambiguous material enactments that animate learning and teaching in the undergraduate preparation of professional practitioners.

Preparing Professional Practitioners

This preliminary study of undergraduate professional education across six health and business professions juxtaposes the ways course leaders in accounting, human resource management, marketing, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and speech pathology represent their curriculum in course documents with how they talk about
their individual professions and how they believe that the curriculum in their institution prepares students for professional practice.

The study was organised in two stages comprising a document analysis and in-depth individual interviews with course leaders. Common across all programs was what it known as the “CASIMS” document - generated by the university’s “Course and Subject Information Management System”. This represents the official documentation for all aspects of a particular program. Depending on availability, additional documents include the code of ethics for each discipline area, subject outlines, documents relating to: accreditation, competencies, and registration; fieldwork manuals and reports; assessment items and course manuals.

The interviewees were course leaders in accounting, human resource management, marketing, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, and speech pathology at a regional university with eight dispersed campuses in Australia. Academics who coordinated the respective courses (or had done so recently) and who were identified as ‘culture carriers’ for each course were invited to take part. As the health interviewees were all in the same location they did a group interview for reasons of expediency. The business interviews were done individually on three campuses either by phone or face-to-face. Each interviewee brought their particular work experiences and views on teaching their profession to the interview. Rather than being in any sense representative, course leaders’ responses were subjective and individual, coloured by the politics of course development, by the (dis)comfort level in the present position and by ability to interpret interview questions.

All the participants seemed to be time poor (and one was hungry and thirsty). These academics agreed to interviews during Week 1 of semester. Understandably some of their responses sound stressed. Some of the business academics in the study are no longer in the position they are talking about so had to think back. The interviewer had to travel through floods to do the interviews on three campuses at this dispersed campus university in inland Australia.

The interviewer sought to elicit the course leaders’ perspectives on desired characteristics of graduates, learning to become a practitioner in each profession, aspects of each course seen as being critical to professional practice, and events regarded as most influential in producing the envisaged graduate. Points of distinction, how these then shape profession-specific teaching and learning and how students become socialised into their intended profession were also drawn out.
Table 1 profiles the six health and business programs in this comparative study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study pattern</th>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Staged program</th>
<th>Student age &amp; experience</th>
<th>Number of Profession-specific subjects</th>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>Professional Body</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>F/T P/T</td>
<td>On Campus</td>
<td>Yes 3 years FT</td>
<td>School leavers</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>BAcc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Resource Management</td>
<td>F/T P/T</td>
<td>Distance</td>
<td>Flexible 3 years FT</td>
<td>School leavers</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>BBus (HRM)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>F/T P/T</td>
<td>On campus</td>
<td>Flexible 3 years FT</td>
<td>School leavers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>BBus (Mktg)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational Therapy</td>
<td>F/T</td>
<td>On campus</td>
<td>Yes 4 yrs</td>
<td>Mainly school leavers</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>BOccupational Therapy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physiotherapy</td>
<td>F/T</td>
<td>On campus</td>
<td>Yes 4yrs</td>
<td>Mainly school leavers</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>BPhysiotherapy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech Pathology</td>
<td>F/T</td>
<td>On campus</td>
<td>Yes 4yrs</td>
<td>Mainly school leavers</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>BHlthSc(SP)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Profile of health and business courses

An in-depth discussion of complex domains of concern of each of the professions in the study is outside the scope of this paper. Suffice to say that depending on the traditions and regulations of the profession in question (Aberton & Slade 2012) health and business professionals will address questions of risk in terms of financial and safety and communication prioritising interpersonal and / or organisational communication differently.

Learning to become a physio, an accountant, an OT...

In the section that follows, we begin to juxtapose both the talk and text of course leaders. We use both selected fragments of regulatory documents, stripped from CASIMS, juxtaposed against interview data to illustrate how visible and less visible material enactments are in play whenever work and learning practices are represented. Excerpts from regulatory course documents are read against the talk of these course leaders who are negotiating human and non-human worlds often on a daily basis with students in their undergraduate Health and Business programs. First, in (un)covering bodies to learn, second, through locating undocumented social ‘points of passage’ across curricula and third, touching on the public visibility of the different professions under study.
Fragment 1: 
(un)covering bodies to learn

Graduates are also equipped to practise in metropolitan areas and internationally and have the knowledge to formulate physiotherapeutic diagnoses and provide appropriate programs of therapeutic exercise and treatments to those primarily with physical conditions (CASIMS Physiotherapy 2011).

In response to the question about desired characteristics of graduates there was some regulatory talk of ‘competencies’ and ‘attributes’, both perceived and ascribed, that course leaders regard as necessary for graduating health professionals at the start of the group interview. Then the interviewer asks what are the learning and teaching strategies in becoming a physio. With a backdrop of students understanding anatomy and physiology the physiotherapy course leader talks about ‘… professional craft skills like: how do you mobilise a joint and how do you prescribe strengthening exercises for somebody’. After acknowledging that prac’ classes constitute a lot of the teaching across all three health courses in the study, she talks about the role underwear plays in the practical learning of physiotherapy students:

... we think of physio classes as a lot of prac’ classes that are hands-on skills. You’ll put your hands on each other. You do things, you have to take your clothes off. You have to be comfortable with that. Physio students have got special underwear that they wear that they sell through the physio club for their prac’ classes…. They’re ‘Bonds’. They’re black ‘Bonds’ knickers and trunks for the boys… And they actually quite like them. The students have told me because they all feel they – gives them the sameness when they take their gear off. (course leader, physiotherapy)

Her embodied description of gender-specific underwear that students designed specially for their prac’ classes in physiotherapy practice conveys a sense of agency to learn through touch and putting hands on each other. What this excerpt is making visible was not visible in the course documents is collective student socialisation for self regulation as part of preparing professional physiotherapy practitioners. Is there some link between touching people and working in cohorts to develop skills? Students in Business courses don’t need to practice on each other to become ‘safe’ practitioners. What this fragment makes visible was not visible in the regulatory documents is that physiotherapy students mobilise for self-regulation collectively managing their image by manufacturing purpose-designed underwear, a type of professional ‘uniform’. Big issues of curriculum and professional power are ‘woven into the most mundane fragments of talk and writing’ (MacLure, 2003, p. viii) in our study. This example of the undies story is a good illustration of this.

In contrast the body is absent in all of the interviews with business course leaders. There is no putting hands on here. The accounting course leader evokes the image of the accountant in the grey cardigan – concealing the body in a shapeless genderless garment.

one of the distinctions of the professions is that people think accounting is boring. So that’s the grey cardigan approach. When I was teaching first year at one stage or an early subject I used to do a little activity on the grey cardigan approach and I had some little readings, funny things, on accounting as an exciting profession. And I actually had an example where one accountant had been killed and buried in
concrete in a building is Singapore, I think, because of the involvement in some kickbacks and things. So accounting can be quite a dangerous profession [laughs].

accountants need to be very conscious of the duty of care they owe to other people. And that they – because money or the lack of it has such an immediate impact on peoples’ well-being.

Well the role that an accountant is to – the generic role of an accountant – is to, is to report on business transactions and the way the accountants do that is to translate those into a series of debits and credits. Things we add to balance sheet items or we deduct from balance sheet items. Profit and loss items. So that it can all be summed up at the end of the period. (course leader, accounting)

There are differences in the duty of care for physiotherapists and accountants. For accounting it is all about the things – the debits and the credits. Marketing is very people-oriented but there is no talk about bodies in the interview. Touching bodies highlights the different kinds of relationships with clients, the degree of intimacy and how this shapes teaching and learning.

**Fragment 2: subversive? and taken for granted?**

The Bachelor of Accounting will prepare graduates with the capacity to become successful, ethical and professional accountants and responsible business people able to think and act independently, tolerate ambiguity and think creatively (CASIMS Accounting 2011).

There are differences in what in the documents say and what happens in everyday life. Sometimes, accounts of lived experience can write social and creative moments of learning back in.

In response to a question about whether accounting’s reputation as a boring subject has some truth in it the accounting course leader responds:

I think a lot of people teach accounting by demonstrating how to resolve a problem and then giving the students a whole load of problems to solve. And they repeat that over and over again. And that can get boring. But in a way it’s the way accountants think because accountants do do things in the same way over and over and over again. So in a way it’s in culture, cultural – inculcating, I don’t know a word like that – the profession to the student. But it doesn’t necessarily engage the student with the learning. So I think you probably have [laughing] a mismatch there about what actually happens in the profession and what should happen in the classroom to engage the students. And I think accountants, some accounting lecturers, need to be a bit more imaginative in the way they teach accounting. But by its nature accounting lecturers aren’t necessarily that imaginative because that’s the nature of the profession.

I probably focus on the ethics more than other people do. So I don’t know whether, I don’t think it’s as widely accepted. I think accountants – Accountants operate in business so they’re pragmatic. They’ve got to get things done. They’ve got to – they’ve got to show a profit at the end of the year. They are pragmatic people. (course leader, accounting)
The aspirations articulated in the course profile to tolerate ambiguity and think creatively do not seem to be borne out in the interview data.

At a point in the group interview, the interviewer asks the occupational therapy course leader to tell her, in his opinion, what events in the course are most influential in producing the envisaged occupational therapist:

… I actually think it starts right from the first event that we hold in orientation week where we actually have current students talking to our first years and just to explain about the course and their experiences of it … I think that’s where the journey starts … I’m going to … talk about the social events they raise because I think this is really important for them where they develop their identity as occupational therapy students with their other cohorts from different years. So things like when they do the bowling night or when they go on their bus – mystery bus tours – and stuff like that.

And our end of year conference which the fourth years organise. And that’s their final assessment task and that’s when … – they invite clinicians and family and friends can come to that and that to me – that’s a really – always been an excellent event. That’s a real transition then from ‘we’ve finished our course, we are now’ [?]

So though, I mean practice is one of the key things, the key events, but I actually think there are other things which actually gel them together as occupational therapy students which I think is important for them, for their identity and those are the … social things that happen.

(course leader, occupational therapy)

Events such as a bowls night and a mystery bus tour can be sites of learning and transition/becoming in undergraduate courses (alcohol notwithstanding) in addition to workplace learning. These sort of socio-material occurrences may not be visible in regulatory course documents on new graduate Competencies etc. Nevertheless, such temporal markers can be traced as ‘points of passage’ within nursing curricula (Deppoliti, 2008). The cultural values of course communities may differ as reflected in the social priorities of occupational therapy and physiotherapy students.

Fragment 3: (in)visible to the public?

The overall aim of the course is to prepare speech pathologists to recognise the rights of individuals to possess an effective form of communicating and swallowing, and to provide a high quality service to individuals and the community to maximise these functions through assessment and diagnosis, intervention, appropriate liaison, advocacy, community education and research. Students attain clinical and professional competence as defined by the Competency-Based Occupational Standards for Entry Level Speech Pathologists in Australia - Revised (C-BOS R, Speech Pathology Australia, 2001) by the end of the course (CASIMS speech pathology 2011).

What image is conjured up when we talk of an accountant, a physiotherapist or a speech pathologist? In this section of the group interview the course leaders are discussing some of the critical aspects of their respective courses. The interviewer asks the occupational therapist about diversity in types of occupational therapists and talk turns to the public visibility of these professions:
Speech pathologist … I’d argue that the general public knows any more about speech therapists than they do about occupational therapists –

Occupational therapist: Oh they've seen the ‘King’s Speech’, it’s OK.
Speech pathologist: Oh they have, have they? Ooo [everyone laughs]
Physiotherapist: What a great movie.
Speech pathologist: It was a great movie.
Physiotherapist: A ripping yarn
Speech pathologist: “No you'll come to my office” – that was the best bit for me. Here’s me trying to tell them to get out there into the clients realm and he’s going no.

Physiotherapist: Literally
Speech pathologist: Yes, literally, that’s so funny
Interviewer: Makes me wonder if it’s done the same for speech pathology as NCIS has for –

Occupational therapist; For pathology, yeah
Speech pathologist: No I don’t think we’re going to be quite that sexy [more laughter] or sure of ourselves.

(course leaders, group interview)

For the marketing course leader the issue is not the visibility of the marketing profession but the players in the industry that are most visible in society.

We had to keep proving the value of our profession…I think with some good reason that people see marketers as being about sales, promotions, some people are a bit more knowledgeable may realise, you know, that’s there’s market research, you know the annoying people that phone us to do surveys. But that’s often the extent of peoples’ understanding of the profession. And when you look at a marketing degree and what’s in a marketing degree it should become very clear that marketing is a lot broader than that… the broad scope that the marketer in an organisation is often the key area where you are looking outside the organisation as well as inside….

So there is a mismatch between the role of marketing as perceived by marketers and the understanding of the role of marketers perceived by others. But I think that when you look at job advertisements for our graduates the view of academia, in terms of what we are trying to produce, I think is a valid one. It's not that we're assuming that marketers do more than they actually do. You know, the positions are out that validate our view just it isn't something that the general public is aware of.

Stakeholders, government whatever, that you can end up having a very broad vision of the operation of an organisation and broader than say an accountant might or broader than your HR manager might. Because of the very nature of the marketing role means having to look across a very broad range of people and broad range of functions. So and then the related thing there is then the type of skills and the type of way of thinking that's needed to have that broad scope.
This broad focus of the marketers articulated by the marketing course leader may be symptomatic of a very broad field on the cusp of professionalisation with disciplinary tensions between its practices, craft and theories. The general public may be only too aware of those annoying market researchers who ring you up...

**Concluding comments**

We were insider and outsider researchers to the six professions in the study. We have traced in a comparative way instances of how the presence or absence of regulation produces visible and less visible enactments in contemporary spaces preparing professional practitioners. Juxtaposing text and talk of the course leaders in this preliminary study, enabled us to ‘peer beneath’ the official representations or ‘mats of regulation’ of each course and listen to the practical wisdom of course leaders preparing professional practitioners, glimpsing fragments of moments and musings on practice and material enactments of practice. Identities of professions may be obscured or contorted underneath mats of regulations.

The metaphor ‘peering underneath mats of regulation’ refers to performing a revelatory action related to the preparation of professional practitioners. Imagine lifting ‘mats’ of regulations that have been put over and perhaps sedimented onto the figure of a profession. Some of the things that then became visible in this preliminary study included how on campus students can colour in a curriculum during a four year course as well as conversations about identity, public profile and scope in professions who are themselves at different stages of professionalisation. Obviously there is a need for another study to ask students what the influential events during the course might be from their perspectives. Further comparative research is indicated to map points of passage and student initiatives across curricula of different courses using unlikely discipline partnerships.
References


