



The importance of NZPI membership to private sector planning consultants and new graduates

Hamish G RENNIE

*Senior Lecturer in Environmental Management and Planning, Department of Environment, Society and Design,
Lincoln University, New Zealand*

Organisations that restrict their membership to people that have met and maintain particular knowledge and skill standards, and agree to be bound by particular codes of conduct, appear to be generally accepted by New Zealand society as valuable. In some cases there is legislative support for particular professions' certification systems, for instance lawyers practising certificates, registered surveyors and engineers, and the certification of hearing commissioners under the Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA). Others, for instance architects, resource managers and planners, lack such legislative support and consequently it is more difficult to gauge their value.

There are qualitative mechanisms that provide an indication of the value of such professional organisations and certifications. For instance, in RMA hearings, expert witnesses state the basis for their expertise and if they are presenting planning evidence one basis for claiming professional standing is that they are full members of the New Zealand Planning Institute (NZPI). There are instances of hearing commissioners seeking confirmation of an expert's professional membership when they have given planning evidence and in at least one instance I am aware of a lawyer who was frustrated in his desire to lodge a complaint about unprofessional conduct

when he found that the self-stated 'professional' planner was not a member of the NZPI.

The extent to which universities are prepared to invest in meeting NZPI requirements to have their course accredited is also indicative of the value of professional planning qualifications. In that context, Auckland, Massey, Lincoln and, recently, Waikato Universities have each invested in establishing four year under-graduate programmes accredited by the NZPI. In addition, each of these universities, and Otago, has a masters' qualification that enables those who have not completed undergraduate planning degrees to complete an accredited post-graduate qualification. A graduate of an accredited degree can obtain 'graduate member' status in the NZPI and after three further years of planning practice, may apply for full membership of the NZPI. Those without an accredited degree can apply for NZPI full membership after seven years of planning practice, but otherwise are only eligible for associate member status (which requires no qualifications or even planning experience and consequently is not recognised as of 'professional' status). Given that the requirements for an accredited NZPI programme are more onerous than ordinary or even other professional (e.g., law) degrees, the value of an accredited

programme is carefully weighed when a University decides to offer it.

In early 2012, Lincoln University decided that it would continue to offer an NZPI accredited Bachelors degree. The decision followed a 2008 NZPI review that recommended the existing accredited undergraduate programme should be re-accredited, but a subsequent change in the NZPI's Education Policy meant that the NZPI Council declined to re-accredit the bachelor's degree.

The reason for this was primarily structural. The then existing Lincoln programme required students to complete a 4-year programme that comprised a 3-year Bachelor of Environmental Management and Planning (BEMP) with a Professional Planning minor, plus a post-graduate fourth year that included courses specified by the NZPI (known as a 3+1 degree). The new NZPI Education Policy, unlike that of equivalent professional planning institutes overseas (e.g., the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA)), does not allow for a 3+1 model. The NZPI also viewed the number of different qualifications through which the fourth year of study could be taken was confusing, especially as none included the word 'planning' in their title (e.g., BEM(Hons), PGDip Resource Studies, MAppSc(Env't Mgt)).

While Lincoln University accepted that a single 4-year undergraduate degree provided a clear path for students to follow to a planning degree it was also aware that students choosing Lincoln University often did not identify professional planning as a career of interest until late in their degree. A stand-alone undergraduate degree in planning might struggle to directly attract sufficient student numbers to justify its existence. Lincoln first year students tend to be attracted by rural, land-based or environmental management issues and tend to see planning as urban-oriented,

only seeing it as desirable as they advance through their study. The University saw its planning niche as being the nexus of environmental management, planning and policy and was confident in the quality of its programme, a confidence reinforced by the positive review by the NZPI's own review panel. Developing a new stand-alone 4 year planning degree also went against the then international trend to standardise international bachelors' degrees as 3-year, rather than 4-year. Other NZPI requirements regarding the input to planning programmes are also problematic, especially for smaller-than-Auckland planning programmes such as Lincoln's.

As noted, Lincoln University made the commitment in 2012 to offer a professional 4-year undergraduate degree, the Bachelor of Environmental Planning and Policy (BEPP). The accredited, professional standing of the BEPP meant that it emerged unscathed in an unprecedented 2013 comprehensive review and restructuring of all the University's undergraduate programmes and qualifications. The first intake of students into the BEPP degree was in 2013. In a transitional arrangement with NZPI, students enrolled in the previously accredited programme who complete the fourth year by the end of 2015 meet the requirements of the NZPI for graduate member status. Students more interested in environmental management than planning, or who are unable to meet the standards required to advance to fourth year studies, can exit with a Bachelor of Environmental Management degree after three years.

THE SURVEY

Seeking re-accreditation was not an easy decision and the usefulness of an NZPI membership had to be demonstrated if it was to gain the necessary internal support. A colleague's

'ring around' of recruitment agencies to get an indication of the value of NZPI accredited degrees reported as follows (edited for confidentiality):

None of them suggested NZPI membership was essential; actually none of them knew off-hand what it was. They suggested a broad based degree with analytical skills and work (or extra-curricular) experience was desirable for - loosely - planning roles. One suggested degrees were more or less seen as an indicator of ability (more than knowing particular stuff) and that employers don't really expect new graduates to have professional membership. An observation is that when jobs are scarce employers are picky and use things like NZPI membership as part of selection. When there are many opportunities, employers are less fussy. Simple supply and demand.

This led some to call the value of NZPI accreditation into question. Observations that several Lincoln graduates, and others, with non-accredited degrees were able to obtain planning and related positions ahead of graduates with NZPI-accredited degrees reinforced the concern that the value of NZPI membership was at least overstated. The difficulty some able and well-performed, NZPI qualified graduates had in obtaining interviews or positions did not help support the value of NZPI accreditation.

Consequently, as part of the decision-making process, a survey was emailed in early 2012 to professional private sector planning companies/consultants listed in the NZPI directory. This survey targeted those private sector organisations most knowledgeable about professional employment, and theoretically most likely to employ professionally qualified planners, to see if the observations regarding council recruitment also held for the private sector. The survey was not seeking to identify what careers Lincoln University graduates went into and

specifically did not seek a comparison of the perceived quality of different university planning degrees. The results are therefore of much wider relevance.

The survey started with the above quote and its origin and sought views on this summary. It then asked three further specific questions:

- Whether you consider NZPI (graduate) eligibility is essential for new 'planning' staff in your organisation?
- How advantageous having NZPI eligibility is for employment at any stage (ie in competing with another new graduate or in entry to higher level positions)?
- If our 4 year programme was accredited to the PIA (Australian equivalent of NZPI, which has reciprocal recognition agreements with NZPI) how advantageous would that be for our PIA- eligible graduates in gaining a position in your organisation?

The respondents ranged from some of the largest companies that did planning work to companies who no longer employed staff (but whose answers were based on either past experience or on what they would do if they took on staff).

The general tenor of responses to the views of the recruitment agencies was that as far as council recruitment went, the views of the recruitment agents was probably correct. As one commented, the recruitment agencies were merely reporting their experience and so it was difficult to question their views. However one respondent, with considerable experience in council and private sectors, provided an interesting alternative perspective:

I have had many discussions with recruitment agencies from around the country - many of them thought it was

their duty to try to convince me that the candidate they had was as good, if not better than a candidate with NZPI eligibility. This is because they tend to have more non eligible planners on their books at any given time than eligible ones. This is likely to be because eligible ones are snapped up by employers who recognise the value of this eligibility in the market place. I have spent many conversations with recruitment people trying to explain why eligibility for full NZPI membership is important, but it was always a bit like trying to buy a four wheel drive from a car dealer when all they had was standard drive.

The respondents' views on the value of professional membership to their own (and in some cases, previous) private sector company was somewhat different. The following is a summary of their responses to that part of the survey:

1. Academic ability and personal attributes are the most important features when recruiting new graduates. Virtually no-one requires NZPI graduate eligibility for new graduates, but having completed an accredited programme is an advantage for graduates when an employer is deciding between two evenly matched candidates. Only one person stated that eligibility for NZPI membership would be a decided negative in obtaining employment with them.

2. Eligibility for membership of NZPI is very important/essential for employment at senior levels as a planner because of the credibility it provides in the Environment Court (where a professional opinion is often required to be given) and for reassuring clients of the competence of the staff. Even those not impressed by the NZPI or the quality of NZPI members or their work, noted that they considered membership a 'necessary evil' at this level.

3. The market is a major determinant of the degree to which eligibility for NZPI membership is valuable to a new graduate. In times when there is a shortage of planners the market will take anyone, when there is a surplus of planners they become choosy. Some respondents contested this, however, noting that eligibility is always a requirement for their company.

4. NZPI membership appeared less important for smaller provincial based firms than with larger companies. Those larger companies with nationwide practices tended to be the strongest supporters of NZPI eligibility. Companies in the north of New Zealand also seemed to support NZPI membership more.

Most did not address the last question regarding the employment of PIA eligible members, but those that did were either neutral or indicated that they would not expect someone with PIA eligibility to have the same level of knowledge and competence in New Zealand planning systems and law as they would those with NZPI membership. One even noted that they would probably favour membership of the British equivalent of NZPI to that of Australia. This raises a number of questions about the appropriateness of reciprocal recognition agreements between planning institutes or the understanding of planning as a generic discipline by practitioners. These are issues that may usefully be explored in future research, but will not be further commented on here.

A number of respondents also volunteered comparisons between planners and those who did environmental, resource management, science or geography degrees. The general tenor of these was that those who had done accredited degrees were better at communicating and reasoning in the context of the RMA than were those with other degrees and that planning was

more than just the RMA, which was sometimes not appreciated by people with non-planning accredited degrees. One member, but critic of the NZPI noted “To be fair, they do offer good networking and training opportunities and information for the profession (e.g., planning focus, salary survey, etc), but this has nothing to do with an employee’s ability or attractiveness to employers”. Significantly, while the recruitment benefits of NZPI accredited degrees may

be less obvious at the new graduate level, the clear indication that it is valued for progression to more senior levels sends a clear signal that studying for an NZPI accredited degree is a good long-term investment for a student who is interested in working in the private sector.

CONCLUSION

The overall findings of the survey suggest that NZPI membership only adds real value for a recent graduate when there is a shortage of graduates knowledgeable about planning and planning issues. There are, however, specifically ‘planning’ positions in, usually large, companies where NZPI graduate member eligibility is necessary. There are therefore advantages in studying for an NZPI accredited degree. It also suggests that where there are larger populations or larger companies (as in the north of New Zealand) NZPI membership is a means of enhancing credibility and employability.

Perhaps this reflects the traditional urban focus of the NZPI and traditional planning degrees and the higher level of urbanisation in the north. This in turn, implies a need for more niche, non-urban oriented degrees in other parts of New Zealand and flags a need for the NZPI to explore why it is seen as less relevant in less urban areas. This also supports the more environmental planning and policy focus of newer professional planning programmes such as Lincoln’s and Waikato’s. Speculatively, the lower level of importance attached to recruiting staff with accredited degrees in more provincial areas may also reflect stronger, well-established local or niche client networks that consequently may be less-competitive.