

The Role of a Viva Voce (Oral Examination) for Property Students

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Abstract

A 2006 survey of New Zealand property graduates and their employers highlighted communication skills as an area of graduate weakness. This paper reviews the development and assessment of oral communication in the Bachelor of AgriCommerce degree and discusses the use of the oral examination as an assessment method for final year valuation students. Problems associated with oral examination are discussed and alternative methods of assessment are identified.

Key words

Property education, assessment, communication

Introduction

Oral communication skills are essential for a successful professional career. A graduate starting employment in a business environment needs to be able to communicate effectively and appropriately with colleagues, supervisors, clients and other professionals. This communication will range widely from informal conversation to formal meetings (Crosling and Ward, (2002)). Property professionals are frequently asked to explain and defend their work verbally in both informal and formal situations. Young graduates working as valuers will often have to explain their valuation assumptions to a supervisor or client. Early in their career they will probably aim to pass a professional interview as part of an accreditation process and as they progress through their career they may well be called on to provide expert evidence and defend their work under cross examination.

In a recent survey of New Zealand property graduates and their employers McCarthy (2006) found that poor oral communication skills were identified as a weakness by both graduates and their employers. Graduates were concerned about their competency with interpersonal and business skills and several suggested that university programmes should include courses that develop negotiation, client relations and communication skills. Employers also noted that communication skills of recent graduates were weak in relation to industry requirements.

Communication forms an important component of most business degree programs. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB, (2009)) expects an undergraduate degree in business to include learning experience in communication abilities. Massey University's undergraduate property degrees conform to this and communication has been taught at an introductory level and integrated in papers throughout the degree. This has been reviewed in the new BAgriCommerce degree and communication is now embedded in the assurance of learning procedures and integrated throughout the programme but is no longer taught as a separate introductory paper. In changing this we hope to make better use of the opportunities to develop important personal competencies and track student achievement in communication skills throughout the three years of study.

Oral communication competency is hard to assess and tends to be restricted to presentation assessment. While this is a useful exercise for students it is not a skill that many will use widely in the initial stages of their career. We have included a viva voce (oral examination) in the rural valuation courses at Massey for many years and I believe that this provides a very useful assessment of another type of oral communication competency while also assessing breadth and depth of understanding of course material. However it is an expensive assessment process and satisfactory alternatives need to be investigated.

This paper provides the background of development of the viva voce in the rural valuation courses taught at Massey University over the last 35 years and poses some alternatives to this form of examination.

Rural Valuation at Massey University

Rural valuation has been offered as a discipline in agricultural degrees at Massey University since 1973. Degree structures have changed over the years and rural valuation has moved from being a single year major in a four year agricultural science

degree to an option in a three year degree that combines the disciplines of business and agriculture. The following table shows how the rural valuation degree programs have developed.

	Bachelor of Agricultural Science	Bachelor of Agriculture	Bachelor of Applied Science	Bachelor of AgriCommerce
Structure	4 year agricultural degree with specialization in year 4, valuation a 4 th year major	3 year agricultural degree, valuation one of two major options, valuation papers in years 2 & 3	3 year agricultural degree, valuation one of several major options, valuation papers in years 2 & 3	3 year degree with combination of agricultural and business papers, valuation an option, valuation papers in years 2 & 3
Offered	1973 to 1996	1980 - 1996	1996 - 2008	From 2009
Papers in common with Bachelor of Business Studies (Valuation and Property Management)	none	none	Applied Valuation 1, Building Technology: Construction, Planning Studies, Law of Property	Accounting, Legal and Social Environment of Business, Principles of Marketing, Fundamentals of Finance, Economics, Applied Valuation 1, Building Technology: Construction, Planning Studies, Law of Property

In the 1970s, when rural valuation was first taught at Massey University, students took two rural valuation papers in the fourth year of their Bachelor of Agricultural Science degree. One of these was an applied paper and the other covered valuation theory. There were separate three hour written final examinations for the two rural valuation papers, one focused on the theory of valuation and the other had a more applied focus. In addition to the two written final examinations the students completed a field test and oral examination. Each student was assigned a separate farm and was accompanied on their farm visit by an academic staff member. The students had one week to complete a valuation and loan recommendation report on the farm that they had visited. They then attended an oral examination during which they were questioned on the farm budgets, farming operation and valuation by the staff member who had accompanied them to the farm and a rural valuation lecturer. This was a very time consuming and expensive exercise for the valuation academics to organize and over time modifications had to be made to this examination process. The two written examinations have been reduced to one three hour written examination plus the field test, the students inspect the farm properties on their own, the field exercise only requires a valuation (and no financial/farm management analysis) but the oral examination has a more rigorous valuation content and covers all material relevant to rural valuation. The vivas are conducted by two examiners, the rural valuation lecturer and an experienced industry representative who is familiar with the farm properties being valued.

The rural valuation degree programs at Massey University have always included a viva voce in the final year. I regard the viva voce as a very important final examination. It puts students in an unfamiliar situation where they need to demonstrate that they understand and can apply the theory that they have learnt throughout their degree by answering oral questions accurately and confidently. They

have the added pressure of having to pass the oral examination to pass the final rural valuation paper. This enables me to clearly demonstrate my level of confidence in the professional valuation skills of graduates.

AgriCommerce Degree

The Bachelor of AgriCommerce was offered for the first time in 2009, replacing the Bachelor of Applied Science majors in Agribusiness and Rural Valuation and Management. The new degree has a very strong agribusiness focus with a goal to produce graduates who understand management of agribusinesses throughout the value chain. Rural valuation is offered as an option in this degree for those students who take the suite of papers required by the New Zealand Valuers Registration Board. One of the learning goals of the BAgriCommerce is that;

Graduates demonstrate collaborative skills and communicate effectively through a variety of written and oral communication modes and media.

The assurance of learning procedures set out to achieve this learning goal are;¹

By Programme Requirement, Structure, and/or Feature:

1. All Schedule A, 100-level papers (both on-campus and extra-mural modes) will integrate opportunities for the use of e-learning in the design and delivery of course content, and for the submission and delivery of assessment items.
2. The 5 100-level business papers (both on-campus and extra-mural modes) will incorporate opportunities for face-to-face contact (between academic staff and student and student-to-student) augmented by interactivity within the learning management system.
3. The final year capstone paper will explicitly incorporate a requirement for collaboration between students.

By Course-embedded Content & Assessment:

4. Two 100-level papers will explicitly incorporate communications theory into the course content and a total of at least 10% of the assessment for each student in one of these papers will focus explicitly on communications principles and practices.
5. Three of the core papers will integrate opportunities for the development of students' numeracy competence and the communication of quantitative data. A 200-level paper will explicitly incorporate an assessment (of not less than 15% of the marks assigned for the paper) requiring computer software to present and interpret information.
6. A practicum paper will be partially assessed (not less than 20% of the overall marks assigned for the paper) for professional writing competence.
7. The capstone paper will explicitly incorporate an assessment (of not less than 10% of the overall marks assigned for the paper) of students' oral presentation competence through either face-to-face or e-mediated communication of their assigned work.

The above learning procedures require students to communicate electronically and face to face and to collaborate with each other. Students are assessed on their ability to communicate quantitative data, write to a professional standard and give oral presentations.

When graduates enter the work force most of their oral communication will be on a one to one basis with peers, their seniors and clients. This ability is not tested in the

¹ Adapted from: Assurance of Learning Procedures, Bachelor of AgriCommerce (2009).
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above learning outcomes but is tested in the oral examination that has been a requirement in the final year valuation paper.

Professional Interview for Property Professionals

The oral examination at university, in a supportive environment, is good preparation for future examinations that graduates will face in their career. Professional interviews are commonly used in the valuation professional as part of the accreditation process. In New Zealand PINZ requires members attend an interview to advance from affiliate to full member status and then from full member to senior member status. The New Zealand Valuers Registration Board (VRB) also interviews all applicants for registration as a valuer. The Australian Property Institute, the Appraisal Institute of Canada and the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors all conduct similar professional interviews to assess professional competence.

The VRB interview in New Zealand is a rigorous process that most young valuers view with trepidation. A valuer can apply for registration, having completed the required educational qualification, reached 23 years of age and worked for three years in full time valuation work. The applicant submits a diary of work completed and 20 valuation reports. Prior to the interview the applicant has one hour to review three written valuation scenarios. He/she is then questioned on these scenarios and asked general questions relating to work completed and topics of relevance to the valuation work that they are undertaking. The oral interview can last for up to two hours. I do not have empirical data on interview pass rates but I am aware that the VRB examine to a high standard and it is not uncommon for applicants to fail at their first attempt.

Recommendations

I strongly support continuation of an oral examination for final year rural valuation students. The process is a positive one for students who have prepared fully for the interview and highlights shortfalls to those who haven't prepared. This is an invaluable lesson to learn before entering the workforce and either helps a graduate to gain confidence in their own ability and judgment or provides a final wakeup call to take learning seriously. It is also valuable early preparation for professional oral examinations and is useful to enhance employment interview skills.

However we do face a problem with reduced funding available for this method of assessment and need to look for alternative cost effective ways to ensure students have opportunity to develop their oral communication skills. I am considering a range of alternative methods including;

1. Greater use of in-class activities, such as class debates and short presentations that build these oral communication skills.
2. Use of a mock viva process conducted amongst peers. Student groups could be assigned a topic to research and prepare questions and answers for use in individual interviews. They would then interview and assess all other class members individually. All students would have the opportunity to be interviewer and interviewee.
3. An individual oral examination, with the lecturer, on a valuation report that they have submitted during the semester.
4. A process similar to the VRB interview where the student is given a valuation problem to consider for a brief period and then questioned on their analysis of that problem.

With these suggestions I am avoiding the expense of an individual farm inspection but I am still requiring the student to defend their own work and demonstrate that they have a sound understanding of the required body of knowledge and the confidence to express their knowledge.

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