

TASA - The Australian Sociological Association

Applied Sociology Thematic Group

For those who work outside University

Contact email January 2012

New Year Greetings (Western and Chinese) to everyone. I hope you will have a happy and productive year. Kung Hei Fat Choi

This month's letter is by way of a report. On the 'Draft Threshold Learning Outcomes for Sociology, Consultation Paper'. As you will know from the December TASA E-list News:

That TASA, as the peak body for Sociology in Australia, has been tasked with developing Threshold Learning Outcomes (TLOs), or minimum standards, for Australian undergraduate Sociology degrees. A process has been undertaken to develop draft TLOs for Sociology, and TASA is currently seeking feedback on them. In response to this request I offered the following feedback:

Having read the Consultation Paper and the British Benchmark Statement I would like to comment on two matters in particular.

First, the third paragraph of 'Threshold Learning Outcomes for Sociology'.

The paragraph consists of two sentences:

1. "As a discipline, Sociology is characterised by empirically based social research and by carefully examined social theory. Sociology students develop skills in critical thinking, self-direction, collaboration and communication."

2. "Graduates of sociology programs are well equipped to go into a variety of careers across a range of government and non-government sectors, particularly those that require high level research and critical thinking skills."

I am not sure that the first sentence is entirely true and even if it is, the second sentence does not automatically follow. In my role as convenor of the Applied Sociology Thematic Group, I keep in touch with my members on a monthly basis through an e-mail where I highlight issues of concern to those who work outside universities. In the December 2011 e-mail I raised the following matters.

I then copied the email and the responses I received from you about my comments.

Second, I referred to the statement made in item seven in the 'Engagement' section which reads:

Demonstrate an ability to communicate sociological ideas, principles and knowledge to specialist and non-specialist audiences using appropriate formats.

I then used the illustration I used in my article in the last issue of Nexus (Vol 23 No. 4) on sociology outside universities.

One Professor from Melbourne University was given a large grant by one of the mining giants to do a study of the towns they had set up and provide recommendations for future towns. The results of his study were written up and bound in 16 volumes. When he presented the study to the Company Board

he set out the volumes before them and told them what they contained would provide the guidance the company needed. The Managing Director, said: "That's no use, where is the executive summary?" The Professor's response was; "If you want to know what to do, read the report." And walked out.

Neither understood the other. They each had their normal way of doing things and could not understand what had gone wrong.

To this I added: The approach to knowledge and its application outside universities is very different to what is required in academia. In universities, as your paper very properly indicates, you have to demonstrate you understand the breadth and depth of the discipline. Whilst this is a basic requirement in both arenas, in academia it is tested, in other places it is expected.

A third point I raised, dealt with the continuing educational issue which is not covered in their paper and I acknowledged that the committee may consider it to be outside of their remit. However, having raised it, it might get some action from somewhere. To cover this point I attached a copy of my October e-mail to you where I raised the question 'How can we get Professional Development outside Universities?' To this I added:

Most professions today require their members to undertake regular professional development programmes or lose their status as a member of the profession. Even the company that provides my house cleaner requires their cleaners to undertake regular in service training. If sociology ignores this approach it is in danger of being diminished in the eyes of employers and other professions. It would be helpful if university sociology department could formally develop professional develop programmes jointly with people working as sociologists outside academia. I suggest that both areas of sociology would benefit from this approach.

Well that is what I have been up to, I hope you approve. There has not been any response from the committee as yet. Any feedback you care to make will be gratefully accepted.

Alan Scott

Group Convenor