

REGIONAL REPORT – UNITED KINGDOM



PM in the UK Today: Teaching the Project Manager!

By Miles Shepherd

Project Management (PM) in the UK is a well established occupation. The principle PM organisation in UK, the Association for Project Management (APM), has been established for more than 30 year and its certification system has roots reaching back for almost as long. There is a well-established industry that supports the aspiring PM and offers a wide range of courses from simple training in use of computer based support tools through technical subjects like scheduling to the more recent soft skills in risk and stakeholder management. A glance at the specialist press such as APM's in house news magazine, *Project*, or the widely respected *Project Manager Today* provide details of dozens of courses, some geared towards formal certification from APM or PMI, some more broadly based – but all are commercially available.



There is, however, another rapidly developing segment of the market in developing project managers – the Higher Education sector. The PM societies have long regarded the field of project management as a highly specialised one that requires not just training but appropriate education to develop the skill set necessary to conduct projects appropriately. This education is seen as similar to that needed by engineering professionals, hardly surprising since there are strong connections between PM and various forms of engineering. It is also hardly surprising that there is now a range of under- and post-graduate degree programmes to support the project manager. What is surprising is that there are, so far, few formal links between the university programmes and the PM societies, although APM has set talks in motion to develop the links that many universities seek.

The offering in the UK is broad: there are 11 undergraduate programmes, all catering for the building and construction industry, more than 50 Masters Programmes at 41 universities and a brace of MBAs. The numbers grow almost weekly – two new programmes, one a range of research-based additions to an existing programme and the other a new offering with interesting majors available in aerospace engineering, knowledge management and specialist IT Development methodologies. Somewhat surprisingly, there are only two PM-based MBAs. PM frequently figures as an option in many such programmes but is hard to separate from the BA aspects.



Interestingly, most programmes are based around either APM's BoK in its various guises or the Project Management Institute's PMBOK®. Yet these are increasingly seen as restrictive and deterministic, thus condemning the PM to a limited role as a technician, rather than the more broad, professional that the PM societies see for their members. The weaknesses of BoKs have been debated almost since they first appeared nearly 30 years ago but have been more clearly articulated in the "Making Projects Critical" series of conferences run by the Universities of Manchester and the West of England. More recently, the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council sponsored a Rethinking Project Management Network (reported previously on these pages) highlighting the issues of complexity facing practitioners, noting that few of the current crop of Master's programmes adequately equip the practitioner to deal with the reality of modern projects.



New types of course are needed to prepare the modern Project Manager adequately. So the emergence of innovative programmes such as Westminster University's "Psychology for Project Managers" and Queen's University Belfast's "Rural Development and PM" offer a way ahead. There are also new educational approaches such as the Reflective Masters piloted by the University of Manchester. This is based on work by Chris Argyris (double loop learning) and Donald Schön (Reflective Practitioner), as well as systems approaches of the type propounded by Peter Checkland (Soft Systems Analysis). A student on this course recently won one of APM's academic awards.



While there are exciting developments on the academic front, the trainers have also been forced to respond. Their market is intensely competitive and their reluctance to make expensive changes to their courses is well known. However, to stay competitive, some are now seeking to offer longer term qualification, sometimes based on the syllabi of societies such as the British Computer Society, Chartered Management Institute and APM, so that customers can build a qualification profile based on a series of short course qualifications. Not surprisingly, universities respond with their own range of part-time degree offerings and short courses. The result is a very wide choice of training and education.

The range of training and educational offerings for the UK based project manager is broad and getting broader. The search for more effective individual development is forcing PM trainers to look to their range, possibly with the outcome of broader based specialist courses and universities are responding. The outlook is interesting for the professional project manager.



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