

An Opposing View

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An Opposing View

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Professor Miall's column on registration and accreditation is written solely from the point of view of a "geologist's geologist".

I agree with some of what he says. We do not need accreditation to be proud of our earth science degrees. The mere act of registration is not likely to make us better geoscientists. Most schools in Canada provide a training that stands with or exceeds that provided anywhere in the world. I know it, you know it, Professor Miall knows it.

The problem is that the general public does not know it, and are not in a position to distinguish someone with a 3-year liberal arts degree and a few courses in geology from someone with a 4-year degree from Queen's or a 5-year degree from UBC.

A crucial point in Miall's argument is that geoscientists do not deal with the general public, but with other professionals, and therefore that publicly perceived accreditation is not necessary. What he fails to stress is that ultimately the work of many geoscientists does affect the public, and that this then has to be presented by these other professionals who use credentials obtained in their own fields to give it the appearance of legitimacy. Often even this unsatisfactory route is not available. I take issue with Miall when he says that engineers have to deal more frequently with the lay-person than geoscientists. There are many geologists and geophysicists who have to deal with the general public through non-professionals such as entrepreneurs and stock-brokers. At one time fellowship in GAC conferred legitimacy

in the eyes of the Ontario Securities Commission. Wisely the GAC has stepped out from this role, since their selection process for fellows is unlikely to stand up in a court of law as an adequate accreditation procedure. In most provinces one has to have satisfied the local Association of Professional Engineers if one is to have an opinion that is legitimate in the eyes of many of those seeking it. As a geologist and non-engineer I have long resented this. I suspect that I am not alone. Miall appears to be content that "the vast majority of the earth science profession" should continue "working for other professionals". Perhaps this is the way it will remain, but the same is true of engineers, and increasingly true of lawyers and chartered accountants, and I think that the young geologist entering our profession should be able to become registered in his own field, without obtaining credentials as an engineer, lawyer or chartered accountant.

Whether we as geoscientists like it or not, we live in a world that believes in credentials; we use law courts which rely on registered professionals; and if we are unwilling to become registered, others with lesser ability in our field, but with credentials in other fields, will take our places.

Miall mentions the criticism that has been levelled in Alberta. This may well be true, but it does not mean that we have to make the same mistakes on the national scale that have been made there. He notes that registration in Alberta is administered by APEGGA, a body that also handles engineers presumably partly on the grounds of economy. If we introduce earth science accreditation nationwide, we will be able to form an accreditation and registration body much more responsive to our particular needs, and one which will over-ride provincial boundaries (we must ensure that it does), and still economize on the basis of scale.

He is also concerned that accreditation will inhibit the training that we have the freedom

to offer under our present system. I suppose that many of us who concentrate on scientific research, rather than the practical use of knowledge, are worried that, in order to meet the requirements of accreditation boards, the content of pure science in our programmes will have to be reduced at the expense of the empirical and the applied. It certainly worries me. My response is that we in the universities should not fight accreditation, which, I believe would be beneficial to many of our graduates, but should see that it is designed in the right way by the right people.

Speaking as a non-engineer, I do not want to see the accreditation criteria of Associations of Professional Engineers moulding our programmes. Speaking as a hard-rock geologist, I do not want to see accreditation designed exclusively by petroleum geologists. Speaking as a teacher, I want to see a strong input from educators. Speaking as a researcher, I can see that there is a role for non-accredited undergraduate programmes side-by-side in the same department with accredited ones. There could be a set of core subjects for the registered geoscientist, just as at present there is a core of subjects that must be taken by an undergraduate in most departments if he is to be designated as a specialist.

In summary, I believe that the public, although they may not have realized it, wants registered geoscientists. I believe that many geologists wish that they were registered, and that many future geoscientists would choose an accredited programme if it were offered to them.

I do not believe that we in the universities should fight accreditation. Rather, we should become involved and ensure that it is implemented in the right way, not as a straight-jacket to our programmes, but as a flexible core of subjects. In this way we can help to bring home to the public that our graduates are the professionals we know them to be.

Geologists working in industry for oil or mining companies are familiar with regulatory body requirements for preparation of reports and attendant legal responsibilities. The two articles on these pages by Dr. Miall and Dr. Naldrett discuss the pros and cons of a national body for professional registration and or accreditation in Canada. The Geological Association of Canada (GAC) does not take a stand either way at this time but has formed the Professional Affairs Committee to identify the interests of the membership and to determine a course of action. All comments and suggestions are welcome and should be made to members of the committee.

Comments intended for publication should be submitted to Geolog rather than Geoscience Canada, and Geolog will be used by the Professional Affairs Committee to solicit response from Fellows and Associates of GAC.

It should be emphasized that GAC does not intend to become a licensing body or registering organization for professionals but will, however, contribute to the efforts of other organizations.

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