

THE PROJECT SCHOOL

by Felix le Roux

The University of Pretoria's Project School, initiated by Mr Felix le Roux, a lecturer in the Department of Construction Economics in the School of the Built Environment, was launched in 1996 with the attendance of 35 Construction Management students. The school has since been held annually and involves both undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Students are taken out of their familiar milieu into a neutral and isolated environment where they spend four days. Accommodation, food and workrooms with chairs, tables and power outlets suitable for electronic equipment and computers are provided. All other equipment necessary for drawing and model-building, like calculators, computers and printers, as well as materials usually required in compiling simple presentations, are supplied by the students.

The Project School is primarily aimed at introducing cross-disciplinary groupwork, encouraging individual participation through the communication of theoretical knowledge and enhancing practical experience in simulated circumstances. The neutral and isolated environment contributes to the participation of students in a situation where they can assess their own professional readiness when they are required to use their acquired skills to think on their feet. Students are further expected to attend all lectures, tests and evaluation and feedback sessions, almost as though they were attending real project meetings, doing presentations and being evaluated by clients. The regulations that normally apply to all University of Pretoria subjects regarding tests, examinations and non-attendance also apply to the Project School.

Construction of the Project School

The Project School is specifically constructed to afford students the opportunity to participate in the planning of a property development project as part of a professional team, simulating circumstances as near to reality as possible. The students are divided into groups that include at least one candidate from each of the six disciplines (architecture, landscape architecture, interior architecture, quantity surveying, construction management and town and regional planning).

The Project School starts with the writing of tests that examine participants' working knowledge on topics such as project planning, project management and project presentation in a multidisciplinary context.

Each group receives the same project brief and the students start working on their projects on the evening of the first school day, handing in their proposals on the morning of the fourth and final school day. The completed projects are presented to and formally evaluated by high-standing practitioners from the respective disciplines and the marks attained by each group form part of each individual student's year mark. At the end of the project, students are again tested to assess newly acquired knowledge and skills developed by attending the school.

Scope of the projects

The projects differ each year and would typically take place on a site in an area not familiar to the students in respect of detailed knowledge and possible previous experience. All students therefore have more or less the same background knowledge of the site. The students then gain experience by arguing every stage of the development proposal on equal footing, with the input of specific knowledge and skills from the relevant 'professional' on the team.

The end result is a complete proposal that contains the work of each of the above disciplines, with the final test being the demonstration of the overall feasibility of the project. All aspects of project feasibility are addressed, including the socio-economic, marketing, physical, legal and financial aspects. The incorporation and application of the principles of

sustainable development (environmental, social and economic impacts, the use of renewable resources and energy and water efficiency) are addressed. During the course of the school the students are 'visited' by their lecturers and students are allowed to consult them, as experts, on critical issues. Lecturers are usually consulted in a soundboard fashion rather than by seeking direct advice.

The proposals that are finally presented should be complete in respect of design, site development, urban design (buildings, structures, interior, landscaping and roads), construction (scheduling, cost estimates, sources of finance and financial statements) and town and regional planning (compliance with the development framework of the region and/or request for re-zoning if required), to name but a few of the evaluation criteria. The evaluation process is intended to contribute to the learning experience of the students. This is enhanced through assessment by a qualified professional who practises privately in and around Pretoria.

Over the years, the Project School has proven to be an additional educational opportunity for self-evaluation and to prepare students for the real world. One of the major benefits derived from the Project School experience is the discovery by participants of their own and co-students' competency levels in the various disciplines and the adequacy and extent of the knowledge and skills acquired over the duration of their studies. 📍

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