

Deprofessionalisation

Consequences for community safety, government, business and the science workforce

- Deprofessionalisation drives down standards - a failure to maintain professional standards results in compromised quality and risk to the community and increased liabilities for business and government.
- Governments have a responsibility to act in the interest of the wider public in terms of safety, public health and the public interest. The funding of science needs to operate from a cost base which protects this position and recognises the importance of professional qualifications and standards.
- Deprofessionalisation is a key threat to a viable and sustainable science and R&D workforce and therefore to Australia's future innovative capability.

What is a professional and how are professional standards maintained?

A position is regarded as professional if it is governed by the technical and ethical standards of a profession which the Macquarie Dictionary defines as “a vocation requiring knowledge of some department of learning or science.” A combination of legislation, Australian Standards and the relevant codes of ethics alongside continuing professional development are the mechanisms by which high standards of professional practice and the relevance and currency of the qualification and experience are maintained in science. Scientists are committed to professional standards, and have built a culture of integrity and independent enquiry around the profession.

What is deprofessionalisation?

Deprofessionalisation is the systematic deskilling of professional positions. It is a process which occurs in a workplace or industry when non-qualified or less-qualified individuals are used to perform work which is more properly performed by appropriately qualified individuals.

Instances of practices which can lead to deprofessionalisation in science include:

- the devaluing of professional work by replacing the requirement for professional qualifications in classification structures with generic classifications not requiring specific science qualifications or a specific level of science qualification;
- replacing professional scientists with non-degree qualified technical officers; and
- practices such as not including post-nominals on business cards undermining the importance of scientific work being undertaken by degree-qualified professional scientists.

What is the context for deprofessionalisation?

The push to cut costs, the removal of scientists from decision-making roles in favour of business managers and the trend toward fewer professionals with science expertise being appointed to management positions are each characteristics of the application of commercially-driven business models to the conduct of scientific inquiry over the last two decades which have provided an environment which allows for deprofessionalisation. Technological advances in equipment allowing for mechanisation and automation have also encouraged the misinformed view that professionally-qualified scientists are not required to undertake and/or oversee “bench” science.

Why does deprofessionalisation matter?

Most importantly, the devaluing of professional work drives down standards and increases risk to the community – with the greatest and most obvious risks in the environmental, agriculture, medical/health and national security areas. It also creates increased liabilities for governments and businesses that cut corners on quality and high professional standards as the quality of products and services for which they are responsible are compromised.

For the science workforce, it can lead to pay cuts, a lack of career progression incentives in classification structures, disaffection and lack of job satisfaction and ultimately scientists leaving the profession and problems attracting new graduates. In turn, this affects the long-term viability and sustainability of the science and R&D workforce and its capacity to support innovation.