

Few issues in graphic design have caused as much controversy and debate as have industry regulation, title protection and professional certification. The debate becomes more pertinent and emotional as the profession matures and the industry achieves greater recognition and exposure. This article explores opposing opinions about industry control and reviews some examples of regulatory mechanisms adopted by professional design bodies.

Tested and detested designers

Conflicting opinions on title protection and industry regulation

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Rapid technological development has liberated and democratised graphic design on a global scale. Previously, design practice consisted of a small and highly skilled workforce who combined sophisticated creative and manual skills to produce graphic design products. It was only accessible to those in possession of a creative aptitude, supported by academic training or a labourious industry apprenticeship. Today, do-it-yourself graphics software packages enable millions of individuals with a 'sense of creativity' to 'practice design' – on varying levels – without much demand for technical training and experience. This has led to general confusion about what may be labelled **professional** design and who may claim the title, **professional designer**. Many graphic designers are calling for the implementation of formal title protection measures, such as certification, on the basis of qualification, competence and experience, whilst others believe that anyone has the right to claim the title of designer. In addition, commerce and industry are requesting guidelines that define the level of expertise which can be expected from design contractors.

National and international graphic design associations, societies and institutes have responded to the expectations of a broad spectrum of key players by introducing a number of strategies. Many countries support the concept of professional sheltering and diverse routes are followed in an attempt to accommodate

unique regional circumstances. Regulatory systems have been devised to discriminate between levels of expertise by classifying practitioners according to set criteria. Categories generally include affiliate professionals (fringe practitioners), student and licentiate practitioners (entry level), **accredited and/or certified professionals** (highest levels). This classification system indicates the standing of the individual in comparison to his/her peers.

OPINIONS

Due to their multi-dimensional and complex natures, regulatory processes and procedures have created a plethora of arguments. In some instances, opposing opinions have transformed design organisations into ideological battlefields with the most controversial issues being rationales, perceived relevance and ways of measuring professional competence.

There appear to be three conflicting schools of thought. Firstly, a group with varying levels of qualification, expertise and experience, who nurtures the idea that all designers are exclusively creative people who sell their 'artistic' skills for commercial gain. It supports the maintenance of the *status quo* and deems all designers as equal amongst a generic definition of visual artists. This group tentatively supports organised industry bodies whose activities rarely go beyond that of informal social clubs.

At the opposite end is a school who believes that graphic design has matured into a complex science which deserves to be treated and respected as a profession similar to medicine, law, architecture and engineering. Generally, the supporters of this school are formally qualified with broad practical experience. They support professional bodies who provide active membership developmental programmes. They expect these bodies to implement formal regulatory structures which control membership admission according to explicit competence classifications. Many advocates of this school support the implementation of compulsory 'testing,' similar to the legal bar exam, which will certify practitioners as **professional** designers.

The third school of thought also supports the notion of maintaining the *status quo* and seldom involves itself in any of the above-mentioned groupings or their activities. Comprising individuals with varying levels of training, the group opts to function independently and tolerates all practitioners of design without acknowledging any form of professional discrimination.

The arguments offered against, or in support of regulation by the first two groups encapsulate differing perceptions of the functions of design and designers in both professional and broader cultural contexts.

Pro-regulation

Formal regulation, if managed effectively, holds many advantages:

- It rationalises perceptions and defines the scope of professional design expertise.
- It enables clients to make informed choices which go beyond the provision of basic creative skills.
- It upholds high service levels and sets standard criteria for ethics and conduct.
- It standardises expectations and responsibilities and creates structures for accountability resulting in cost saving for clients.
- It fosters professional pride and builds a like-minded fraternity.
- It measures competence according to international standards and identifies unique local needs.
- It increases international competitiveness and functions as a valuable exportable resource.
- It educates the general public about the benefits of professional design to society, commerce and industry.
- It advances the place of design in the national agenda and provides the opportunity to lobby government and interest groups about pertinent issues that impact on the profession.
- It creates a forum where formal bodies of supporting industries such as media and printing, can debate and define generally acceptable standards, ethics and expectations.
- It sets parameters for educational standards and provides valuable guidelines to design educators.
- The collaboration between practice and education fosters theoretical research and the development of design theory. These contribute to national cultural and economic resources.

Anti-regulation

Formal regulation cannot be implemented successfully:

- The graphic design discipline is too diverse to be defined by one definition.
- Clients are capable of and responsible for differentiating between good and bad.
- Creativity cannot be tested because it is unpredictable and subjective.
- Certification systems are too complex to define, implement and manage. They are expensive to run and need a substantial investment in human resources.
- The certification document or title will only be as good as the worst designer it supposedly backs.
- The certification document or title will have little commercial value and will not recruit new clients unless it is supported by an extensive education and marketing campaign.
- It leads to the exclusion of talented uncertified practitioners and inhibits free-market economic practice.
- It leads to complacency and creates a false sense of security amongst clients and certified designers.
- Unscrupulous educational institutions use it as a tool to recruit students purely for financial gain, making the standard of education questionable.
- It creates a 'style police' that manipulate the natural development of new creative movements and exclude 'different thinking' creators.
- It is inappropriate and counter-productive in developing communities because it excludes previously disadvantaged entrepreneurs, which can lead to politicising the design industry. Developing countries cannot afford to marginalise talented entrepreneurs.

In this author's view, the pro-regulation school of thought defines professional design as a process that combines three key skills: creative, strategic (research, scientific analysis, behavioural prediction, project management) and technological. It considers graphic design to be a combined economic and cultural (artistic) activity that integrates subjective and objective components and holds designers accountable for achieving specified results which can be predicted before the project/process commences. Advocates support the notion of categorising like-minded members according to their level of skills and experience as defined by an appointed or elected evaluation council/structure whose discretion is acceptable to the broad membership.

Opposers of regulation define graphic design activity as a combination of creative and technological skills that functions mainly as a subjective cultural (artistic) phenomenon where designers cannot be held accountable for the final result of the process. Thus, the end result cannot be predicted or quantified. Categorisation of membership according to any formula that rates skill and experience levels is not viable as any rating system will be unfairly subjective and outrightly discriminatory.

These opposing interpretations are reflected by two extracts from a discussion forum taken from the *Communication Arts* (1995-1998) web site:

... I recently explained to a sales representative who rose to the position of Marketing Manager why he couldn't neatly arrange his products on a page with a vertical grid in a strictly horizontal manner; he said: 'wahoo, this is friggin' rocket science. I had no idea. We could have saved months of planning had we spoken to you sooner.' Ignorance is bliss and design is rocket science if you have some clue. It isn't a shot in the dark; well, not for all of us, anyway. S Kirkland.

Let's be real here, this isn't rocket science. Unlike architecture the lives of people are not at stake. Sure someone's business may depend on what we communicate with our design but they [clients] are ultimately the one's who decide that ... Certification [regulation] may be a good idea for the production aspect of our industry, ie. printing, paper, etc. but there is no way you can certify creativity. Those who believe that are certifiable. B Bothe

A comparison of arguments has led the author to **conditionally** support the stance of the pro-regulation school of thought. Creativity – the focal argument of the anti-regulation school – is but one of a battery of skills needed to ensure successful design. A solid foundation of design principles, understanding of the communication process, strategic planning, marketing and management principles, interpretation of research and control of the production process, equip designers to make informed decisions. The manner in which these principles and skills are managed and manipulated in unison with high levels of creativity, differentiates the novice practitioner and the professional designer.

The bigger the risk of loss or failure becomes for buyers of design, the more important it becomes for them to know the level of skills, experience and accountability of the design contractor. Not all buyers of design are capable of assessing many of these factors and need access to credible **advice**. This implies an independant assessment of practitioners' capabilities and the formulation and dissemination of critical information.

The author does not believe that any collective organisation can claim the sole right to own and allocate the generic title of designer. Design organisations should, however, have the opportunity to identify individuals or companies who, in the organisation's opinion, are able to provide services that meet stated criteria. Conditions should be that these organisations publicise their criteria and convincingly substantiate their endorsements. In addition, buyers of design services should have unconditional right to accept or reject any endorsement.

REGULATORY ORGANISATIONS

The tradition of forming regulatory structures and organisations is as old as most professions. Historically, craftsmen in creative professions grouped themselves into guilds which set entry criteria and identified competence levels – the lowest being novices and the highest being master craftsmen. With the advent of industrialisation, guilds dealing with designer-craftsmen gradually transformed into what are today referred to as professional design organisations.

Currently in design, no single definitive organisational format is broadly accepted as an international standard. Each country or region defines the structure of its representative organisations according to local needs and circumstances. These formats include societies, institutes, associations and guilds, all implementing a diverse spectrum of regulatory systems. On a global level, collaboration and the interchanging of ideas amongst organisations has led to the establishment of collectives, like the *International Council of Graphic Design Associations* (ICOGRADA).¹ ICOGRADA promotes, clarifies the role and sets guidelines and professional standards for graphic design at a unified international level.

A cursory review of graphic design organisations reveals trends which allows for a categorisation of four basic models.

Model A

Informal bodies with few or no membership access criteria. These groupings arrange *ad hoc* skills development programmes to further the knowledge of their members without controlling their performance.

Model B

Formal societies and associations with broad membership consisting of diverse levels of competence and limited access criteria. These organisations arrange regular skills development programmes to further the knowledge of their members and execute limited control over performance.

Model C

Formal societies, associations and institutes with exclusive membership granted by means of strict access criteria. These organisations classify their membership according to competence levels identified through various evaluation systems (academic qualification, portfolio assessment, interviews, experience, referrals). Membership categories range from accredited/certified members (highest) to licentiate, affiliate and student members (lowest). They present skills development programmes on a continual basis to further the knowledge of members and execute control over performance, ethics and conduct.

Model D

Formal associations and institutes with exclusive membership granted by means of strict access criteria. Theoretical testing is used to evaluate membership competence levels. They provide compulsory skills development programmes to further the knowledge of members and execute strict control over performance, ethics and conduct. In some cases these organisations are protected by national legislation.

Factors that impact on the model a country's design industry chooses to implement include the degree of maturity of the discipline and its practitioners, national education standards, international economic status, level of population sophistication, the reference framework of different cultures, attitude to change, unique key issues and dominant role players. Many professional bodies from the first world have opted to follow models C and D and implement a battery of tests/formulae to evaluate and rate the competencies of their membership. These models and 'testing' formulae are however not always appropriate for implementation in developing countries like South Africa, for instance.

South Africa formalised its profession in 1953 under the *Society of Industrial Artists and Designers of South Africa* (DSA 1998a), and implemented Model A. Later the organisation developed into the *Society of Designers in South Africa* and attempted to implement Model C. The country and its designers were, however, not mature enough to sustain the model, largely due to international isolation and the status of the industry. The political changes after 1994 forced designers to re-define their role in comparison to the international community, increased global economic competitiveness and the country's unique position between first and third world systems.

In 1997, a group of formally educated designers felt the need to establish a new professional body and industry management system which they believed would be appropriate to the country's unique circumstances. The new body, *Design South Africa* (DSA), was formed with a mandate to implement Model C (DSA 1998b). This decision was informed by a study of examples set by successful organisations in other countries with similar conditions.

INTERNATIONAL ROLE MODELS

A number of member countries of ICOGRADA have successfully established frameworks for regulating their design industries based on Models C and D. They provide useful precedents for South Africa to consult.

The *Society of Graphic Designers of Canada* (GDC) is an interesting example which has established a comprehensive professional regulatory system for its members.

The reasons for doing so included a necessity to distinguish graphic designers from similar but less qualified occupations such as signwriting and desktop publishing and to raise the appreciation of the professional levels of services from graphic designers to be on par with those of interior and industrial design disciplines. With the accreditation system now in place, only suitably qualified members of GDC may use the words, Registered Graphic Designer, when describing themselves (Forstell 1997).

The GDC regulatory system provides buyers of Canadian design with a credible reference system to assess the expertise of design practitioners. Forstell states that formal regulation resulted in

... increased professional standards, an ability for clients to easily find suitably qualified graphic designers when required, establishment of a quality signal for the work of graphic designers and an increased ability for young graphic designers to be prominently established in business in shorter periods of time. The program is seen as a turning point in the change from graphic design being a simple occupation or trade to being a true profession (Forstell 1997).

The Danish design association, *Foreningen Danske Designere* (DD), has achieved remarkable success under Model C. Some years ago, DD implemented an ongoing and aggressive initiative that promotes the services of professional designers. Today, the majority of design buyers in Denmark insist on dealing exclusively with members of DD (Lindenskov Bérubé 1998).

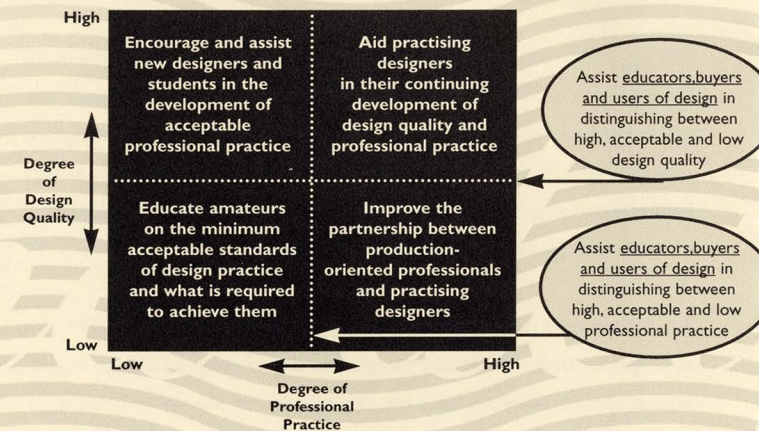
Considering the current status of the South African design industry, the following Australian model seems to offer some viable proposals. In 1996, the *Australian Graphic Design Association* (AGDA) conducted an extensive graphic design industry study. The research showed that graphic designers viewed four major characteristics as pertinent factors in the success of their businesses: creativity, profitability, stimulating clients and solid relationships. The characteristics that clients valued differed dramatically to those identified by the designers: understanding of the client's needs, attention to detail and strategic vision (Lam-Po-Tang 1996). AGDA found this a valuable exercise and used the results as a guide to transform AGDA and assist its membership to become more relevant to market needs.

According to Andrew Lam-Po-Tang (*Communication Arts Community Forum* 1995-1998), AGDA developed a unique framework to help it make sense of the, often emotive, issue of distinguishing between 'true professional designers' and other design practitioners. In response to the question of certification and accreditation he states that

The justification for certification is ... fairly straightforward: so that buyers of design can be better informed. The difficulties start when you try to pin down exactly what the buyer can be reasonably 'better informed' about. Trying to nail a designer's 'creativity' to the wall is a major challenge, if not completely futile. However, it should be possible to say to a potential client, that a given designer appears to adhere to a robust code of ethics (no free pitching, etc) and understands what professional practice (eg. managing the design process, production constraints, written contracts, copyright, etc.) are about.

A lot of the detracting arguments ... focus on the 'free market' principle, which is laudable. However, when economists refer to the 'free market' they mean a well-defined type of market ... one in which comparative information between competitors is readily available. So the point of certification should really be to improve market information, not 'protect' designers in the way the old craft guild structures used to by indulging in cartel-like behaviour. I'm all for anyone having a go at selling a design service, but I will always reserve my right to educate a client on how to make a sensible choice (*Communication Arts Community Forum* 1995-1998).

Similar to the DSA, Australia attempted to merge most of its existing design bodies (graphic, industrial, jewellery, textile, interior and decorators) under a single umbrella body, *Australian Design Professionals* (ADP)² (Forstell 1997). In preparing for amalgamation, the ADP drafted interesting procedures and formulae to rate and categorise the members from various bodies with different membership criteria (ADP 1996b). A number of models/matrices were employed to illustrate aspects that define the strategic imperative for a professional association at various levels.



(ADP 1996a)

The top right area of the matrix identifies the individuals or companies who demonstrate superior levels of creative quality and professional practice. Candidates who fall into this area would be eligible to apply for full professional accreditation - defining the highest level of professional design practice.

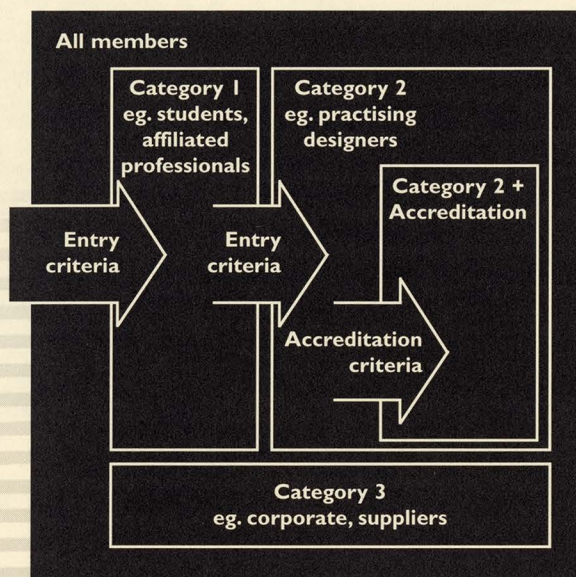
A second matrix proposes a model that defines the relationship amongst different membership categories. As the matrix moves progressively to the right, the level of membership sophistication increases.

Key points to be tested

Should membership categories be

1 inclusive rather exclusive

2 reflective of successively higher standards of design practice



(ADP 1996a)

A third matrix describes the ADP Steering Committee's proposal for an evaluation system that would effectively rate the appropriate categorisation of applications for members. A point system was developed and four key areas were identified: qualification, experience, professional ethics and creativity. This was however rejected because the evaluation of creativity was deemed to be subjective and discriminatory. An alternate formula was presented that consisted of: qualifications, experience, professional ethics and the standard of portfolio.

Membership Category	Qualifications	Experience	Professional Ethics	Portfolio	Minimum requirement
	Type of course completed or being undertaken	Years of experience as a design practitioner	Agreement to comply with association's Code of Ethics	Optional in cases where other criteria do not lead to entry	Threshold for category entry
Student	Enrolment in a recognised course = 6 pts	n/a	n/a	n/a	6 pts
Associate	TAFE Diploma = 3 pts 3 yr degree = 6 pts 4 yr degree = 9 pts	1 year = 3 pts 2 years = 6 pts 3 years = 9 pts	6 pts	Panel judgement 'average' = 3 pts 'excellent' = 9 pts	12 pts
Full member	Completion of recognised 3 yr undergrad course	Three years or more experience within chosen discipline	6 pts	Panel judgement 'average' = 6 pts 'excellent' = 12 pts	18 pts
Industry member	n/a	Three years or more experience within industry	6 pts	n/a	6 pts

(ADP 1996b)

CONCLUSION

These case studies provide valuable information for the development of appropriate structures and regulatory procedures within professional bodies. Their appropriateness to South African conditions are debatable and they need to be closely scrutinised and tested before local implementation. They do, however, provide a starting point for discussion and negotiation.

Clearly, the international trend seems to be the formalising of the design profession with the aim to develop and increase standards of design practice. There is a movement to group design practitioners into defined systems under management bodies that will assess their members' professional capabilities. The challenges that faces professional design bodies (in whatever format) in South Africa include:

- the establishment of a broad constituency;
- the inclusive definition of the local industry's unique place in the global design industry management and economic arenas;
- the establishment of appropriate infrastructure/s, criteria and system/s that are able to serve the totality of local needs;
- finding dependable and appropriate individuals to manage a professional body/ies in the long-term;
- providing added value services to the designers and clients on all levels; and
- remaining proactive without being dominated or controlled by small groups or selective agendas.

NOTES

1 ICOGRADA currently represents independent national organisations for graphic design and visual communication at a unified international level and has 53 member associations in 34 countries.

ICOGRADA's main aims are:

- to raise international standards of graphic design and its practice as well as the professional status of the graphic designer;
- to improve and expand the contribution of graphic design towards a greater understanding between people everywhere and towards a better solution of social, cultural, economic and environmental problems;
- to contribute to the theory and practice of graphic design education and research;
- to co-ordinate and develop matters of professional practice and conduct for the benefit of members; and
- to establish international standards and procedures whenever appropriate, taking into account institutional, cultural and social differences throughout the world. (DSA 1998c)

ICOGRADA defines the task and role of the graphic designers as

an intellectual, technical and creative activity concerned not simply with the production of images but with the analysis, organisation and methods of presentation of visual solutions to communication problems. Information and communication are the basis of worldwide interdependent living, whether in trade, cultural or social spheres. The graphic designer's task is to provide the right answer to visual communication problems of every kind in every sector of society.

Since 1965, ICOGRADA has been actively engaged in liaison about international design standards with the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) and subsequently, with the International Standards Organisation (ISO). ICOGRADA is to promote the development of international standards in all areas where this is considered desirable from the point of view of the graphic design profession (ICOGRADA 1998).

2 The formation of the Australian Design Professionals (ADP) had not concluded when this article went into print. Three participating organisations rejected the amalgamation procedures and presented new recommendations to the ADP steering committee. (ADP 1996b)

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