Home Economics: Present Realities and Future Prospects

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Abstract
This research gives expression to the voice of many of the stakeholders in the field of home economics in Queensland. It reports on the current thinking and attitudes of home economics tertiary students, secondary home economics teachers and graduate home economists in industry towards the home economics profession and the associations which present it.

Data was collected using sample groups of each of the populations indicated, utilising the "cross-over" workshop procedure to enable each target group to respond to a series of pre-formulated questions.

Findings indicate participants identified several major issues and suggestions about the nature, purpose and direction of home economics related to relevance and application, diversity, and need for greater professionalism.

Introduction
Home economics has a long, interesting and unique history. This can be attributed in part to the fact that home economics is understood, translated and practised differently from state to state in Australia, and country to country in the world (Smit 1991:43).

Current home economics in Queensland has been cultivated from two major influences. The first is the British, which focused on the need to train women in scientific theory and practice of skills for homemaking (Logan 1981:5). These origins of the field were described by Thorne (1980:15) as creating a subject which was the:

...vehicle of social ideologies to a degree experienced by no other subject. It had therefore been determined by social and economic concerns rather than educational ones.

The second influence was inspired by the American approach which reformed the focus of home economics to management and the family (Mander, 1987:5). These reforms were the result of two factors: a recognition of the failure of the earlier forms of home economics to liberate women from biologically determined conventional positions of femininity (Carver, 1979:5) and a concern that the institution of home and family were deteriorating, leading to a failure of society (Jax, 1985:23) — two apparently contradictory goals.

The latter influence was not felt in Queensland until the mid-twentieth century. Various practitioners of home economics in Queensland remain advocates for both of the approaches, leading to a range of translations of the subject in classroom settings.

Poststructural studies have referred to the origins of home economics to assist in locating the subjectivities available to practitioners and students (Pendergast, 1991). Conventional and modern home economics remain victims of the location of the field of study outside the dominant discourses of patriarchal society. It has been marginalised by our society and its institutions which privilege universal structures using masculine parameters. Home economics has failed to challenge and break free of the patriarchally imposed bondage by which the field of study was defined and contrived.

Students who study home economics and those who select it as a career have generally failed to gain access to the dominant discourse of our education and work systems. This can be attributed to a failure to challenge the existing male/female duality, which is entirely socially constructed and reinforced, and is self-serving in its goal to maintain the status quo.

Current reviews of the curriculum of Australian and Queensland students have demonstrated the marginalised position in which home economics is located. The Wiltshire review and National Curriculum statements and profiles in the area of Technology, Studies of Society and Environment, and Health and Physical Education while generating enormous work in formulating responses which clearly locate home economics as making significant contributions to each, also provided enormous opportunity to challenge the location of home economics as being appropriately
located as a marginalised field of study. Home economists were able to offer subjectivities and speaking positions which move the field beyond the traditional stereotypes where male/female dualism is a fundamental conceptual device in the construction and reinforcement of society (Davies 1989:9) to a location which deconstructs the duality. This challenge has the potential to subvert patriarchy through a release from its bondage. But where are current teachers, tertiary students and industry based home economists currently located in Queensland society?

As part of the national body of home economics to present a united, consistent and professional appearance, the Home Economics Association of Australia (HEAA) has been reconstituted into the Home Economics Institute of Australia (HEIA). Of principle significance in this change is that members are members of the national association first, and affiliated with their state associations. This centralises the power of the profession in a more significant way than was previously possible. It provides opportunity for major reform and commitment to reform. It is in this environment that home economists must demand the development of active and critical citizenship which challenges the role of society and the structures it creates in shaping males and females, families, education and other structures in our society. This will lead to individuals being informed and aware of the factors which motivate, influence and control their thoughts to enable them to be empowered for change. In this way, barriers separating dominant and marginalised discourse can be eliminated.

The purpose of this study is to explore the current thinking and attitudes of home economics tertiary students, secondary school home economics teachers and graduate home economists in industry towards the home economics profession and the associations which represent it. This study gives expression to the voice of many of the stakeholders in the field of home economics, at this historical moment.

Process
The process was outlined by broad methodological guidelines provided to presidents of state associations of home economics by a consultancy company responsible for advising the HEAA during transition to the HEIA. The purpose of the research at the national level was to provide opportunity for stakeholders to make a contribution to the amalgamation process and to assist in testing attitudes and in identifying issues that the HEAA was not aware of (Siedle 1995).

The sample
A sample was selected for each of the three groups using guidelines provided by the consultancy firm (R. Siedle and Associates):

a. The groups should be composed of 'average' people within the group. Not people who have no knowledge of the profession, and not people who are in official positions (and thus are particularly well informed).

b. Groups should be diverse in ages and in interests (and occupations or specialisations).

c. Select tertiary students from each year, and include boys (men) if available.

d. Select teachers from different areas and specialties.

e. Select industry people of different levels of seniority and age. Similarly, with people from community organisations.

It was necessary to maintain adherence to these guidelines in order to provide valid responses for inclusion in the national summary. The selection of the sample varied for each of the sample groups.

1. Students enrolled in tertiary and TAFE courses: There are three courses students were selected from, with four students selected from each year level. Students were selected to meet the criteria as above, as determined by a lecturer familiar with all of the population. A total of 16 students were invited to attend. There were 14 participants.

2. Secondary school teachers: There were 16 teachers selected to meet the criteria above. In addition, other factors including access and balance between private and state schools were considered. The sample was selected through a consultative process with two lecturers and two professional association members. A total of 16 graduates were invited to attend. There were 9 participants.

3. Home Economics graduates working in industry or in community organisations: Graduates were selected to meet the criteria outlined above. The sample was selected by accessing a graduate destination list and selecting candidates within acceptable proximity. Three lecturers were involved in this consultative process. A total of 16 graduates were invited to attend. There were 4 participants.
Workshop format and procedure
In order to facilitate the data gathering, a common workshop structure was developed and applied on separate occasions to each of the three target groups in the sample.

In accordance with the terms of reference for the exercise, a facilitator from outside the profession was engaged. The facilitator, Associate Professor Clarrie Burke, School of Cultural and Policy Studies, Faculty of Education, Queensland University of Technology, was briefed on the nature and purpose of the exercise. He, in turn, designed the workshop approach for data gathering—a 'cross-over' group process to enable each target group to respond to a separate series of questions pre-formulated by the Home Economics Association of Australia.

The 'cross-over' workshop procedure for each target group involved a number of stages:

Stage 1
- The pre-set questions were divided into sets (of either one, two or three questions) which it was considered would require approximately the same discussion time.
- A number of 'subgroup discussion stations' (equal to the number of sets of questions) were set up at different points in a large classroom.
- Each target group was randomly divided into equal subgroups, and a subgroup assigned to each 'station'.
- A fixed scribe was appointed to each station.

Stage 2
- During the first round each subgroup initially discussed the questions for five minutes — for clarification and familiarity.
- Individual responses to each question were then sought.
- Subgroup members firstly explained and/or substantiated their response, concluding with a statement of the essential point of the response.
- The essential point of each response was recorded on butchers' paper to the satisfaction of the respondent.
- In this way essential points were collected from subgroup members for fifteen minutes.

Stage 5
- At the end of the allotted time the subgroups were signalled to 'cross-over' (clockwise) to the next station — with its different set of questions.
- The stationary scribe briefed the incoming group for five minutes on the set of questions, and of the outgoing group's contribution (essential points).
- The incoming group then set about contributing any additional essential points.

(Stage 5 was repeated until all subgroups had participated at all stations — i.e. responded to all sets of questions.)

Stage 4
- All subgroups were assembled for a plenary session to review the complete sets of responses to all questions. Final suggestions, comments, clarifications and refinements were sought before the response sheets were finalised.

The 'cross-over' process was repeated in similar fashion for each of the target groups during three evenings over one week.

The findings: summarised group responses
The transcripts of recorded responses (essential points) for each workshop were analysed and synthesised as summarised group responses.

The summarised group responses for each question — for students, teachers and graduates in industry — are presented, in turn, as follows:

Students
- **Why did you choose to do a degree in Home Economics?**
  Students chose to do a degree in home economics because:
  - of its relevance to daily living, to improve the quality of life of ALL people
  - the diversity and range of skills in the field of study appeals
  - as a teaching profession, the role of teachers involves educating ALL socio-economic groups in home economics values (B.Ed.)
  - as a helping profession, it focuses on daily life skills (BASHE)
- **What do you see as the core subjects?**
  Students identified a range of core principles underlying home economics (scientific, sociological, and management/consumerism) which were then applied to specific areas (nutrition, shelter, personal development) under the unifying theme of health and well being.
• What is the future of home economics as a school/university subject
Students had a positive view of the future of home economics. However, they indicated a need for ongoing review in specific areas (conservative image, gender equity, physical resources, influence of technology and vocational outcomes...)

• What are the job prospects for graduates?
Students indicated high prospects for employment and provided advice for the field (ensure a range of options, role of professional associations and educational institutions in promoting the field). They considered that the diversity of the field enhances prospects for employment.

• Is home economics a profession?
Students strongly supported the notion of home economics as a profession. However, they indicated that it often lacks professionalism. Advice was offered to address this (methods of promotion, classroom and industrial practice, philosophical basis to understanding, need for higher education and research).

• Does it have an association to represent it? Is this effective?
Students identified bodies solely representing home economics, with others partially in home economics interests. They contrasted the effectiveness of these and determined that home economics associations lacked specific goals, community profile, and were in some cases unprofessional.

• What improvements can you suggest for your course?
Students strongly advocated: links between employing bodies and the University, more community involvement, a re-evaluation of the range of employment options.

Reflection on student view
Students were perceptive in identifying similar issues to those highlighted by experienced practitioners in the field. Of particular significance is the ‘wide-angled’ view they have of the various stakeholders in the nature, purpose, substance and outcomes of the courses.

In addition, students demonstrated the maturity and potential to make a significant contribution to the social and pedagogical discourse relating to these issues. Their call for more higher education and research stems from their perception of the need for improved professionalism. The message could be that the critically reflective capacity of students needs to be considered more often when reviews and evaluations of their field are being planned and conducted.

Teachers
• What is your home economics subject called?
Teachers know their field as home economics, with allied areas including: catering, early childhood, food studies...

• What do you regard as the core areas in home economics?
Teachers identified a range of core areas which incorporate the seven key areas of home economics: food and nutrition, textiles and clothing, housing, management, consumerism, design, human development and relationships.

• Is your principal aware of what home economics is about? Does she/he support your subject?
Teachers held polarised views on their principals’ awareness and support of home economics. This depended upon involvement of home economics staff in other areas of schooling, the quality of facilities, professionalism and experience of home economics teachers, attitude of administration staff, counsellors, guidance officers...

• Why do students choose to do your subject?
Teachers believe students choose their subjects because of: the focus on the individual in a real-life context, the link between theory and practice, the transferability of knowledge and skills, mutually enhancing relationships between students and teachers.

• What quality of student are you getting? Proportions of girls/boys?
Teachers indicated a wide range of ‘quality of students’ and spent considerable time deliberating over just what ‘quality’ is. The proportion of girls to boys in home economics is approximately 5:1, while in the allied field of catering there is an even distribution.

• How do students rate your subject as one to be taught at schools?
Teachers indicated that when students enrolled in the subject their perceptions of home economics were enhanced. Generally once students had participated in the subject they rated it as academic. However, non-participants viewed it as catering for lower academic needs, and with a female orientation.

- What is the future of home economics as a school subject?
  Teachers indicated that 'There is definitely a future, but it will be different.' Suggested modifications included: home economics as an umbrella area with a range of subjects catering for both paid and unpaid outcomes; a need to address issues such as name change, integration, vocational outcomes, male participation, government policy, status of women in society, marketing,...

- Are you a member of any home economics association?
  Teachers indicated a range of responses. Those non-members indicated that the associations offered them nothing extra.

- What is the future of home economics in Australia?
  Teachers indicated that home economics is an important common ground, and a catalyst for social change, specifically in the areas of gender roles, valuing paid and unpaid work, dignity and status of the unemployed. Furthermore, home economics 'must not be afraid of change', and must be proactive in etching a future role for itself.

- What does the HEAA do? What should it do?
  Teachers indicated the main functions of what HEAA
  - does: represents members and home economics at a national level
  - should do: lobby, enhance the profile, encourage higher education and professional development, and maintain the quality of home economists.

Reflection on teacher view
Teachers' comments reinforced the existence of the belief held by many outside the field of home economics that it is a stereotypical subject for girls. There was common agreement that future prospects of the field will be enhanced by building on its strength, which is daily living in real life context. Furthermore, teachers highlighted the potential role home economics has in addressing relevant government policy issues, and in being a catalyst for social change. To this end higher education and professional development are considered to be vital.

Graduates in industry or community jobs

- What job are you doing?
  Graduates indicated: staff training and development, consumer services management.

- How does home economics compare with similar degrees?
  Graduates indicated that their degree is more interesting and the outcomes broader, because of the diversity of the degree. The issuing institution (QUT) also added weight to this because of its higher profile.

- How does the demand for home economics graduates compare with five years ago? What is the outlook for the future?
  Graduates indicated that there were polarised views about the demand for graduates. The future outlook for graduates is good if the degrees are realigned with changing needs/trends, and the potential contribution of graduates is promoted.

- What are the unique qualities that a home economics graduate brings to a job? Why do other graduates not have these qualities?
  Graduates indicated that there are three principal unique qualities: diversity of knowledge and skills, communicative confidence and skills, and scientific knowledge, process and literacy. Other graduates do not have these unique qualities because their degrees have too narrow a focus, and because this focus is not people-oriented.

- Are you a member of a home economics association?
  Graduates' membership of home economics associations varied widely.

- Are the Home Economic associations doing a good job for the profession? What improvements can you suggest?
  Graduates indicated that competition with other associations and professional organisations meant that people were limited...
to the number they could join. In order to entice membership graduates suggested there is a need to: improve the profile, show the benefits of membership, and provide more information to prospective members.

• **What is the outlook for home economics as a subject/profession?**

Graduates indicated that the outlook for home economics as a subject was good, because it was necessary for all. However, it needs to be taught to Year 10 for all males and females, from a gender-neutral approach; it needs to emphasise resource management; and it needs to emphasise specialist fields to give students choice, and broaden context. Graduates indicated that the outlook for home economics as a profession is dependent upon a range of factors: marketing the profession in industry, clearly defining the profession, addressing negative perception of prospective employers, linking industry with education and focusing on the need for home economics.

**Reflection on graduates in industry or community jobs**

Graduates provided a positive picture of the contribution and role of home economists in industry, from a people-oriented perspective. They were clear about the need to address many of the contradictory perceptions held by other professionals and community members in the field.

Clearly the future of home economics is considered to be brighter to the extent that their degree studies and profession development remain diverse, are responsive to changing needs/trends, and that home economics as a profession is clarified, promoted and marketed.

**Major ramifications for the field of home economics**

Responses from the target groups as a whole were analysed for major issues and suggestions about the nature, purpose and direction of home economics. These issues and suggestions tended to fall into three categories:

**Relevance and application**

• Home economics has a high degree of relevance for all people, due to its focus on daily living and well-being.

• The study of home economics develops knowledge, skills and processes which are transferable from paid to unpaid settings.

**Significance of diversity**

• The strengths and weaknesses of the field of home economics are its diversity, which provides difficulties and opportunities.

• Home economics graduates are superior because of their diversity of knowledge and skills, communicative confidence and skills, scientific knowledge, process and literacy.

**Need for greater professionalism**

• Home economists need to address areas of inequity in the social order, as well as within the field itself. It is a powerful yet underutilised tool with which to address social justice issues.

• The professionalism of home economics is open to serious questioning, due to the lack of a common philosophical basis for education, and the need for greater commitment to research and higher education.

• There is a need to establish stronger links between home economics education and employment options, and to promote this knowledge.

• The professional associations representing home economics must have a clear, unambiguous and uncluttered goal. They must focus on enhancing the profile, encouraging higher education and professional development, lobbying and maintaining the quality and integrity of home economists.

**Summary and conclusion**

 Students and graduates, as well as professional associations of home economics have generally failed to gain access to, and participate in the dominant discourse of the education and work systems in which they are engaged. To a significant degree, this has allowed the relegation of home economics to a marginal position in national and state curriculum reviews to take place without substantial counter argument. The period of transition from HEAA to HEIA provided a unique opportunity for key stakeholders to participate in addressing major issues and concerns in home economics, and thereby provide a rich resource to inform future progress as well as to evaluate past performance.

The study which has been presented clearly shows that students see home economics continuing as a helping profession. From the perspective of health and well-being it must be relevant to daily living in contemporary society through the development of daily life skills within a context of social justice and improved professionalism. To this end
stronger links are seen to be needed between employing bodies and the universities. Agreement needs to be reached in the development of higher education and research (home economics) programs in terms of the philosophical basis and specific goals of the field, community profile, and a re-evaluation of employment options.

Teachers were agreed about what ought to constitute the key areas of home economics. Students, according to teachers, continue to be attracted to home economics because of its diversity, its focus on the individual in real-life context, the theory-practice link, the transferability of knowledge and skills, and the mutually enhancing relationships between teacher and students. Students tend to overcome preconceptions about and initial underestimations of home economics, and come to perceive the subject and area as more vigorously academic the longer they experience it. Teachers are optimistic that 'There is definitely a future for home economics, but it will be different.' Viewed as a catalyst for social change home economics must be proactive, addressing such issues as name change, integration, vocational outcomes, male participation, government policy, marketing. Currently home economics associations offer non-members nothing extra. However, teachers generally agreed that home economics associations should more actively lobby, elevate the professional profile of the area, and encourage higher education, professional development and research, to enhance the quality and status of home economics.

Graduates in industry and in the community reflect the considerable range of employment options for home economists. The broader outcomes of their degree studies in home economics is viewed as a particular strength. However, the employability of graduates will be favourable only if the degrees are aligned with changing needs and trends, and the potential contribution of graduates is promoted by the home economics professional associations. The professional associations themselves, at both state and national levels, will need to improve their profiles, show more clearly the benefits of membership, and provide more information to prospective members. Graduates agree that enhancing home economics as a profession calls for improved marketing of the profession clearly defining the profession, addressing negative perception of employers, linking industry with education, and focusing on the continuing need for home economics in contemporary society.

Among the total sample (i.e. three groups taken as a whole) there was common agreement that home economics must be perceived as relevant and applicable to the diverse needs of contemporary society. To this end the groups called for a common philosophical basis for home economics education at all levels, and the need for greater commitment to research, higher education and professional development, stronger links between home economics education and employment options, lobbying, and enhancing the quality and integrity of home economists. The formulation of philosophy will also necessitate addressing the traditional gender roles assigned in patriarchal society in order to determine the contribution of home economics in the demystification of these. Given the historical origins of the subject, it is well located to challenge the marginalisation of knowledge which occurs in patriarchal society.

The challenge to home economists at this a time is to be proactive in response to social imperatives impacting on their profession. The key is active participation in the current discourse relating to the purpose and potential contribution of home economics in schools, higher education and research, professional development, and in contemporary society more generally.

References


