

Be part of the process

Course accreditation and content are essential to produce quality graduates, says John Murray, especially if employers are to fill the 'gap' in students' technical knowledge



If there is one thing that makes the life of a building surveyor more interesting when solving the myriad problems that arise in every working day, it is 'variables'. Each one creates a potential spin on the problem we wish to solve and in approaching these we generally hope that there is an answer which is right for our client, or ourselves.

When recruiting graduate staff, we know that we are committing to a very important, and sometimes costly, promise to assist the new recruit to become Chartered; a status that most see as the pinnacle of their education. As employers, we must not take this promise lightly, but we do so with an expectation that the graduate has an understanding of what we do and has completed an accredited degree course that provides solid foundations upon which they can build their skills and learn their chosen profession – as it says in the RICS *Graduate Route to Membership Guide**, 'Commitment is key'. As employers, technical skills are paramount as it is our promise to teach graduates the practical elements. Their degree is a 'licence to learn' but only if the accredited course content is relevant.

Course content

Prior to interview, we would have filtered through CVs from potential candidates and some of the variables that we face in making our first decision will have been dealt with. These could be the level of the degree that they have attained (or are expected to attain) as well as any relevant work experience they might have gained prior to, or during, the degree course. Setting aside interview technique as 'too big a subject', I do not believe that most employers review course content prior to inviting a candidate for interview or submit them to extensive tests of knowledge at interview stage. But should we now be doing this?

If a CV states 'first class honours degree' on an accredited course then my view is that it should be a given that RICS has reviewed the course content, is of the opinion that the skills learnt will be relevant to any building surveying practice and that the candidate has achieved a good level of knowledge.

The variable that makes this accreditation process most difficult for RICS is not the fast-changing rules and regulations with which we have to comply, but the number of career opportunities open to building surveying graduates. These include local authorities, large construction firms, international private practices, small multi-disciplinary firms, inner city and regional practices, residential, commercial and retail, to name a few. The business focus for each type of firm is not the same and neither are the needs of each type of employer. The variables are numerous

and thus it is a considerable challenge to accredit degrees that accommodate all potential employers' requirements. So how could we move towards a less 'variable' degree accreditation structure?

Core subjects

What should not be variable are the core subjects that all traditional building surveyors need. In my opinion, these are:

1. Building pathology (in both traditional and modern methods of construction)
2. Environmental and material sciences
3. Construction technology
4. The law of contract, tort, property, and landlord and tenant.

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Items 1, 2 and 3 are all symbiotic and by the time the undergraduate reaches their final year they should be conversant with all these subjects and understand how and why they all co-relate. Item 4 is, in my view, extremely important as there are few working days where a legal relationship isn't one of the variables we have to deal with.

With this knowledge, the graduate has the basic construction and legal skills to tackle the more simple tasks they might be asked to perform. More job relevant 'skills' can be taught by the employer (mundic in the South West, for instance). Universities could offer separate 'electives' in curtain walling, cladding systems, building contracts options, contract administration, etc. This would allow most undergraduates to gain knowledge in *their* chosen path without affecting the core skills knowledge that building surveyors need. A degree in 'Construction Business Management (Building Surveying)' will be of little use to someone who wishes to become a 'traditional' building surveyor as the focus is on construction management and new build rather than building surveying (in the traditional sense). I believe that all accredited building surveying

degree courses should contain the aforementioned core subjects as primary learning and offer add-ons for those wishing to have a career in a specific field. Could 'Construction Business Management', as an example, be taught as an elective to a traditional building surveying course?

So what might we employers do to help undergraduates gain an insight into our profession? To supplement the skills they develop on degree courses, I would suggest a more widespread engagement between the universities and employers, and not just the international firms who already put a lot of effort into making their recruitment systems efficient. Work experience is offered almost every year by my city-based practice but, more often than not, it is secondary school pupils who apply to us. Never have I been approached by a university but I think my practice should take the plunge and approach them.

Any graduate working towards their degree would benefit hugely from the insight provided by work experience but only if this is relevant and backed

up by an explanation of what we are doing in each instruction and why. This might also increase the number of graduates entering the profession. We assume that those completing an accredited course do so because they want to pursue a career in surveying. Unfortunately, this is not the case as many graduates move into other careers, but an insight into our typical working week (if there is such a thing) could well lead them to change their minds and stick to the subject in which they have graduated.

This is our profession and we should work with RICS to ensure that accredited courses are covering the skills we employers need, and I believe that practising members should be part of the accreditation process. I would urge all employers to review their work experience offerings and extend these to universities with accredited courses.

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