

EMPLOYABILITY AND THE UNDERGRADUATE BUILDING SURVEYING PROGRAMME AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SALFORD

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BACKGROUND

This reflective case study attempts to explore skills provision & employability aspects embedded in the professionally accredited BSc (Hons) Building Surveying programme, offered in the School of Construction and Property Management, at the University of Salford. The expectations, influence and perspective of stakeholders will be examined, with particular reference to employment. These aspects include demands on higher education providers through the introduction of progress files and curriculum development as influenced by professional institutions. Also, the needs of employers and requirements of students in employment or as prospective employees will be examined.

This study is grounded in the School of Construction and Property Management which resides in the faculty of Business and Informatics in the University of Salford. The scope of the study will concentrate on undergraduate studies within the school. The University has strong links with business and employability as reflected in its mission statement:

Salford's commitment is to education, research and academic enterprise benefiting industry, business and the community

The School, internationally known for its research excellence, has a strong vision:

Our vision is of being a world leader in scholarship in construction and property management

Undergraduate Programmes Offered

At undergraduate level the school provides the following programmes:

HNC in Construction and Property, two years day release study

HND in Construction and Property, two years full-time study

BSc (Hons) Building Surveying, three years full-time, four years full-time with industrial placement and five years part-time by day release.

BSc (Hons) Quantity Surveying, three years full-time, four years full-time with industrial placement and five years part-time by day release.

BSc (Hons) Property Management and Investment, three years full-time, four years full-time with industrial placement and five years part-time by day release.

BSc (Hons) Construction Project Management, three years full-time, four years full-time with industrial placement and five years part-time by day release.

BSc (Hons) Construction Management, four years thin sandwich

Of the honours degrees the three surveying degrees are accredited under a partnering agreement with the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS). The RICS have developed rolling benchmark criteria for courses that wish to be accredited as part of their professional educational review. Their form of selective recruitment looks to attract 'high flyers' and benchmark at the point of entry amongst other performance measures. These comprise of the following minimum criteria:

An average 'A' level (or equivalent) score for 75% of the cohort at each level	230 UCAS points for all UK courses (2002 onwards) 17 points (or equivalent)
Departmental research score (for the Research Assessment Exercise –RAE) <i>(now QAA External Review)</i>	2D Score at RAE
Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA)	17 points TQA
Employability	90% of graduates in 'relevant employment' within 6 months of graduation

RICS UK Threshold Standards – General Overview (RICS, 2001, P4)

The two construction degrees are accredited by the Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB).

Recent History and Cohort Analysis

In 1996 the University of Salford merged with University College Salford. The day-release part-time programmes from the college largely matched the full-time programmes of the university. In 1999 the four undergraduate programmes were re-written so that the four programmes of building surveying, quantity surveying, property management and investment and construction project management were merged into one combined undergraduate programme with full-time and part-time provisions. The construction management programme is a stand alone programme, fully sponsored by industrial partners, which was re-specified in 2001. The HND and HNC technician programmes are combined and were re-specified in 2003.

Cohort sizes for the academic year 2002-3 are shown in the table below:

Programme of Study	Full-time	Part-time
Technician HND & HNC	47	57
Building Surveying	54	59
Quantity Surveying	55	147

Property Management and Investment	32	14
Construction Project Management	24	25
Construction Management	29	N/A
Totals	241	302

As evident from the table the balance of students between full-time and part-time courses are roughly equal, with the exception of a particularly strong part-time quantity surveying programme, reflecting, despite the moves of the RICS away from traditional quantity surveying, its popularity with local employers. Since the merger of the two institutions the part-time programmes have grown in popularity with a small decline in full-time numbers.

This is the result of influences such as tuition fees and the cost of education, particularly for the traditional full-time student living away from home, the continuing strength in local construction and property markets so that employers are investing in the development of school 'A' level leavers and a slight decline in overseas students. Thus, as a course we are becoming increasingly regionalised which is consistent with the current sector wide trends in Higher Education.

The School historically has a strong culture of surveying related scholarship and this is reflected in the balance between surveying and construction disciplines. Recruitment to the construction courses is not strong, the experience of the school supporting the national finding of Wilkie and Giddings (2003).

INDUSTRY COLLABORATION WITHIN THE SCHOOL

Research and Enterprise

The school has the top "six star" rating for research and has an extremely well established network of senior level collaboration on international and national research projects. Enterprise is a growing school activity, the school being the smallest in the university, yet having the largest and currently growing enterprise contribution to its portfolio of activities.

Employment and Collaboration on Undergraduate Programmes

The numbers of part-time students testify to the strength of the local employer and school relationships. Scrutiny of the school's employer database highlights the diversity of employers' businesses and their long-term commitment to the school and sponsorship of employees. Students on 'year-out' placements get support from a placement tutor and visiting tutor. A dynamic database of employers and their changing needs informs students of placement opportunities and students, with tutorial and personal support, embark on the employment selection process. Difficulties occur in this

process in times of local and national economic recessions and also when company employment cycles are out of step with that of academia. Notwithstanding this, in the current climate demand for Building Surveying 'year out' placement students and Graduates largely exceeds supply.

The fully sponsored Construction Management programme has a committed consortium of large national employers. Suitable course applicants are vetted and must then gain employment with a consortium organisation before being accepted on the course. The process is facilitated by the school from marketing, recruitment and management through a steering group consisting of the course team and consortium of personnel and senior managers.

Project based learning is extensively used within modules which is designed to simulate 'real-life' scenario and provides a vehicle for students to integrate and deepen their learning. An example of this is the forthcoming architectural project based upon the 'Fourth Grace' on Liverpool's waterfront. These projects ensure that the content and structure of modules within the Building Surveying programme are directed towards meeting the requirements of students entering professional practice.

In addition, ad-hoc collaboration takes place, for example building surveyors at level 3 in the Design Studies 2 module are assessed by a local Architect in addition to module tutors. A 'real life' critique takes place and students defend their solutions to given building surveying design problems.

CURRICULUM

The Building Surveying programme is partially compromised by its integration with the two other surveying and one construction programme. For example, the Skills *plus* audits and analysis have highlighted the under-provision of IT in general and computer aided design (CAD) specifically. The programme director, external examiners, employers and students have highlighted the importance of CAD, particularly for level 2 students seeking year-out placement employment. Feedback from students has stressed that more exposure to CAD within the programme would help them help gain a deeper knowledge and understanding of the software and better prepare them for their 'year out' in professional practice.

To embed CAD within a module has proved difficult, partly due to the programme having shared modules with other disciplines, for which CAD is non-essential. In response to this feedback the course team have organised additional voluntary CAD tutorials and have specified that assessments must be produced utilizing CAD. Thus, not only do the students learn how to use CAD, a by-product of this is the fact that they also learn how to read construction drawings, which feeds into other modules. However, a more permanently embedded solution is required to develop students' for life in professional practice. Race (1999, p.58) stresses the importance of students' employability, when looking at ways of balancing assessment:

“...point to ways of balancing assessment so that it enhances and enriches students’ learning experience, as well as leading to qualifications that are valid and appropriate for their future lives and careers. The client group served by assessment are diverse, and it is relevant to look at the respective expectations of students themselves, the employers who will take them on when qualified and other significant stakeholders”

University wide key skills initiatives, following programme audits, resulted in the introduction at level 1 of a Professional Skills module. Skills are developed in this module, from personal to professional skills, including building surveying skills such as drawing by hand. This ten credit rated module replaced a materials module, whose content was distributed over four existing technology modules. There was resistance at Programme Director level to this change as he viewed materials technology to be of fundamental importance to a building surveyor. However skills that would enhance employability, as the university responded to QAA requirements meant that skills development was prioritised.

The Programme Director has also highlighted the need for more structural design, in addition to the ten credit structures module at level 2. The new module or enhancing of existing module cannot easily be accommodated due to the inflexibility of the four-outcome modular programme and the increasing demand for additional curriculum content, as evidenced by the skills initiative noted above. Ramsden (2000, p137), when looking at the goals and structure of a course, suggest that it’s all too easy to fall into the trap of including too much content:

“Much the easiest mistake to make in deciding upon content and aims is to include too much content. We should rather strive to include less, but to ensure that students learn that smaller part properly”

As a result of issues, highlighted by examples above, the combined programme is to be subject to review during 2003-4 and the new programme offered in 2004-5.

EMPLOYABILITY AND OTHER THEMES

The Skills *plus* audit has shown that the building surveying programme promotes an implicit but lack of explicit focus on personal reflection. The QAA expectations for the introduction of individual student progress files by 2005-6, with a strong emphasis on each student’s personal development, will promote more active and explicit reflection. A rolling programme commences at level 1 this academic year, where it is expected that using the generic Professional Skills module will act as a vehicle to increase the student’s capacity to reflect.

The school has a history of distance learning masters level programmes supported by virtual and managed learning environments. Developments of more flexible and a variety of study methods, for example by distance learning, are increasing at undergraduate level. The integration of progress

files, virtual and managed learning environments and changing demands on the curriculum is a challenge for programme teams.

The four combined programmes provide the potential for integration across disciplines. Provision of explicit and effective cross discipline learning has proved elusive. At level 1 modules are common but students may not have finally chosen their profession. An attempt to introduce new students to an integrated project proved logistically and practically impossible for students needing high levels of support. At level 2 a group project is effectively introduced, however this is for single discipline groups so that integration is across modules rather than across disciplines.

The main reasons for single discipline group activities are; disproportionate cohort sizes and core discipline modules not allowing interdisciplinary groups to examine the same set of common modules. A previous interdisciplinary group exercise, having a single task resulted in an unsatisfactory outcome where module grades were partially decided on tasks that were outside the scope of the module content. Notwithstanding the previous comments single discipline group working results in many positive and beneficial outcomes. Students view group working at level 3, where results heavily contribute to the final award, as unfair and although some group work is evident, individual assessment predominates.

The strong research culture of the school feeds into the course implicitly and explicitly. Research active staff actively promote their research activities in their teaching. A 40 credit level 3 dissertation module is supported by research methodology tutorials, direct supervision and a dissertation process that directly engages students into the research culture of the school.

OTHER THEMES AND INFLUENCES

Professional institutions, QAA subject benchmark statements, increasing emphasis on curriculum in areas such as environment, health and safety and information communications technology all vie for space and influence in a crowded curriculum. Two elective 20 credit modules are offered at level 3 in order to allow students to study specialist areas including; Conservation, Construction Law, Facilities Management, Information Systems and Strategies, Innovation, Management and Maintenance of Services and Price Bidding and Financial Management. Although student choice and the ability to specialise are viewed positively, decisions on modules to study are often made by pragmatic decisions such as day of attendance and assessment methods.

The university, responding to dynamic influences in society, promote initiatives for widening participation, lifelong learning and diversity. Some initiatives create tensions by containing opposing aims, for example RICS increasing demands for raising entry standards and the demand to promote widening participation. The school needs to conduct its business effectively and efficiently. There are pragmatic largely resource driven demands, for example a finely balanced timetable impacts upon timing and space, which

optimises resources and creates potential compromises in the quality of programme delivery.

Employers and students on day release studies have particular demands for skills based knowledge and application. There is a tension between skills training and educational development which are potentially not complementary and the school attempts to create an acceptable balance between the two philosophies of development.

CONCLUSIONS

The Skills *plus* audit has enabled us to look at the Building Surveying course within the context of the 39 Employability aspects. The audit has stimulated discussion and made us think about the claims made in the curriculum. Programmes in the school and in particular the BSc (Hons) in Building Surveying are designed and delivered by teams reacting to a range of stakeholder demands. Some demands are not conducive to the quality of provision. Programme directors act as champions of their programmes, yet do not have autonomy of decision making, due mainly to reasons explored above, in order for them to tailor the course to create a strong discipline bias.

The BSc (Hons) Building Surveying is strong in technology and design, themes that could be even further developed if greater emphasis on CAD and structures, both of which are advocated by the programme director, occurred. Notwithstanding these reservations the Building Surveying programme is held in very high regard by stakeholders and has produced a high proportion of first class honours students in the last two cohorts of graduating students.

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