

# Planning ahead

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## **Understanding the future educational, professional, and technical demands of building surveying is essential to remain relevant, says Dr Kevin Thomas**

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Future professional and technical demands came under the spotlight at this year's RICS Building Surveying Conference, when more than 520 delegates took part in a debate under the banner of education, skills, and engagement. As one of the invited panel members in this debate, I would like to outline the main points of the discussion and also expand on this topic more widely for the benefit of the members who were not present.

Firstly, education: this is of major importance to the future because the majority of new members are still produced through the graduate route via RICS-accredited university courses.

There are currently 26 RICS-accredited building surveying degrees in the UK delivered at universities, and a small number of accredited international degrees. This reflects the constitution of the building surveying membership, which is still heavily UK-centric with only 10% being non UK-based. By contrast, surveying professions such as commercial property and quantity surveying/ construction have a much larger proportion of international members.

### **Course relevancy**

It is imperative that building surveying degree courses are current in terms of the subjects they deliver, to ensure graduates in the pipeline have the required knowledge, skills and attributes to meet the needs of stakeholders when they are employed (see Building Surveying Journal, March/April 2015).

To inform the discussion at the conference, a short survey was prepared and circulated to leaders of all the UK building surveying degrees. This looked at how relevancy is maintained, engagement with the profession and trends in sandwich placement opportunities and numbers of applications.

To ensure relevance, all respondents confirmed that they regularly review their academic content against RICS APC competencies. This is now a key component of maintaining accreditation of the degree through the RICS partnership agreement.

They also all confirmed that they hold regular, normally twice a year professional/employer liaison meetings with key stakeholders. These are professionals with local, national, and in some instances international profiles. Practitioners are also used extensively to deliver guest lectures on relevant and current topics and assist with assessment of student work, normally linked to 'live' projects.

These activities for ensuring relevance also cover in the most part how engagement with the profession occurs. There are further examples around placements for sandwich students and how these allow direct interaction with employers on a regular basis. As for student placements, there has been a steady decline in opportunities since 2008 although there are encouraging signs of increasing interest from employers. The average placement employment rate is around 50% of a cohort, although the majority of students who wish to undertake the year out do so.

## **Applications recovery**

With regard to numbers applying for building surveying degrees, from a low point of 2013 there are signs of a slow recovery upwards for full-time provision. My own institution, Northumbria University, saw a 41% rise in applications for September 2015 entry compared to the previous year.

However, part-time study has been severely impacted by the long recession and has almost disappeared. Some universities are running classes with only one or two students in years one and two, albeit they can be combined with full-time students in most but not all instances. This was a conscious decision to ensure a service was provided to the local stakeholder employers.

It has to be acknowledged that, ultimately, universities educate and do not train, albeit there are elements of skill development within the curriculum, such as CAD/Revit software training. There is therefore the likelihood that graduates have skills gaps and intervention in some way may be required to improve this.

## **Mentoring scheme**

The Building Surveying Professional Group (BSPG) Board has been proactive in developing a mentoring scheme to help young graduates get work experience or shadowing opportunities and assisting with APC queries and preparation. Still in its infancy, wider success can only be achieved through a larger network of committed individuals. Please contact me if you would like to take part.

The board has also established regular contact with almost all of the UK building surveying degree providers, visiting the universities and speaking to their students. This has proved successful in strengthening relationships and raising awareness.

A significant issue we face is around diversity and the lack of female members in particular. The university graduate pipeline unfortunately reflects this position, in stark contrast to architecture, for example, where the majority of students and graduates are female. There is a lack of suitable building surveying female role models. We need to ensure that women feel they can put themselves forward for promotion to more senior positions. The feeling at the conference discussion was that perhaps overall support is lacking.

According to the [RICS and Macdonald & Company Rewards and attitudes survey 2015](#), women frequently earn less for doing the same job than their male counterparts. Company policies can make it difficult for women to return to work after having children, and unconscious bias continues to plague the industry.

This means we are currently missing out on an area of recruitment for students and therefore graduates. Although the BSPG student initiatives may improve the situation, there is a wider issue related to the marketing of the profession and here RICS has a key role to play.

We also need to consider the more innovative areas of work we engage with, and promote these in schools. Pupils may be enthused by the use of innovative technologies including IT, 3D imaging and modelling, for example.

## **Pay and fees**

The discussion also considered the relative position of the building surveyor compared with other surveyors. Although certainly not underpaid, building surveying is one of the lowest average salaried areas of surveying. According to the RICS and Macdonald & Company survey, on average facilities managers are paid 24% and project managers 34% more than building surveyors.

We need to reinforce to clients the added value that we bring to what we do and state that we will deliver it as specified, whatever the service offered. We may also, however, be culpable as we strive to ensure sufficient business for our organisations to survive and look to undercut competitors.

The BSPG is considering putting together a standard Scope of Service to create more transparency in what we offer and to allow potential clients to compare offers more easily. However, this is unlikely to be an adequate replacement for the previous fee scales, which were finally withdrawn in 2000 after the Monopolies and Mergers Committee considered them to be anti-competitive and operating against the public interest.

The final part of the conference discussion focused on possible changes in the type of work that building surveyors may do in the future. The tension between more managerial and strategic opportunities versus those more technical based was apparent. There is a perception that building surveying degrees are following the management path, but this is not totally accurate.

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The programme leader survey indicated that the most important subjects in the curriculum were building pathology, construction technology, law (i.e. dilapidations) and building surveying practice, highlighting a focus on traditional technical areas. There has, though, been a rise in required management skills and this is predicted to continue with more collaborative working and the reviewing of large amounts of information prepared by others.

The service nature of what we do means there will always be changes in our clients' demands. We need to be ready to accept those changes, otherwise other professionals will be ready to step into our arena and undertake the work. Considering the implications now will give us the opportunity to plan ahead and future proof our unique position as chartered building surveyors.

**Dr Kevin Thomas is Head of [Department of Architecture and Built Environment at Northumbria University](#) and a member of the Building Surveying Professional Group Board**

## **Further information**

- Related competencies include [Construction technology and environmental services](#)
- This feature is taken from the RICS *Building surveying journal* (December 2015/January 2016)