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Does higher education meet expectations when graduates get their first job?

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Abstract

This paper reports the first stage of a study of attitudes and experiences of recent graduates of surveying courses. The aim is determine how graduates at work view the content of their undergraduate course after they have become exposed to practical experience of the profession for which their course was designed to prepare them. A significant focus of the study is the extent to which these graduates' experiences at university prepared them for the RICS Assessment of Professional Competence (APC). The study is based on individual interviews carried out at the interviewee's place of work. An encouraging outcome is that the graduates interviewed, looking back on their experiences from the perspective of professional working life, consider, on average, that half the content of their course is directly 'relevant' and less than one-fifth 'irrelevant'. The interviewees generally consider that coverage of subjects in undergraduate courses is suited to the requirements of the APC, but there is a strong message that courses do not prepare graduates sufficiently for the actual APC process. It is hoped that the results will be seen as relevant to the development of courses in these subject areas.

Keywords: Graduates, Relevance of HE, Surveying Degrees, Curriculum, Assessment of Professional Competence

Introduction

This paper reports the first stage of a study of attitudes and experiences of graduates of Building Surveying, Quantity Surveying, Estate Management and Rural Practice who have graduated in the last five years. The aim of the study is determine how graduates at work view the content of their undergraduate course after they have become exposed to practical experience of the profession for which their course was designed to prepare them. Apart from general preparation for work in a specific field, a significant focus of the study is the extent to which these graduates' experiences at university prepared them for the RICS Assessment of Professional Competence (APC). It is intended that the results will be used to inform development of the Building Surveying degree and other built environment courses at Coventry University and that they will be of interest to the wider academic community in the areas of RICS accredited surveying undergraduate degrees and the various Faculty Boards of the RICS represented in the study.

Context

Designers of undergraduate courses in the general area of surveying have access to requirements and guidance with regard to content from a number of sources. The QAA Benchmark statement for Building and surveying (QAA, 2007) and the Construction Industry Council Higher Education Graduate Common Learning Outcomes (CIC, 2007) provide important guidance but are not prescriptive about precise content. Guidance on content emanating from the RICS was quite specific in the case of (for example) Building Surveying courses in the days of 'Mind the Gap' (Mole, 1997), which listed 'generic areas of knowledge' in the form of a specific list of topics and content. However, since the introduction of the RICS University Partnerships, course design is not dictated by the RICS. 'RICS is not prescriptive in terms of course design. It positively welcomes a diversity of provision.' (RICS, 2005) However the following statement from the same document is significant in the context of this paper: 'Course design should take account of the mandatory APC competences common to all RICS Faculties'.

The APC requirement of a minimum of two years of structured training takes place in the working environment (RICS, 2006). All APC candidates must demonstrate various levels of competency in three types of competencies: mandatory competencies, which are ethics and general business understanding; core competencies, which are specific areas of knowledge required to enable them to become a Chartered Surveyor; and optional competencies, which are further technical competencies to support the core competencies.

In contrast with the ethos of the University Partnerships, the APC Faculty Guides are very prescriptive in terms of specific levels of competency and areas of knowledge and understanding. Competences are set at three levels. Level 1 is set at the knowledge and understanding that a candidate would achieve from studying an appropriate undergraduate degree. Level 2 is achieved by the candidate demonstrating application of that knowledge in

the office environment. Level 3 is demonstrated by the candidate being able to give advice to a client. Ideally there should be continuity between university education and the application of that knowledge through the candidate's structured training period and successful completion of the APC. So, while current guidance on university course content is not particularly prescriptive, in the early years of professional activity graduates are expected to possess quite specific areas of acquired knowledge and understanding in order to satisfy the requirements of APC.

On a different note, an interesting source of attitudes towards course content by students while they are still students is the paper by Frank (2005). From analysis of contributions to a CEBE student essay competition, five factors are identified that create good learning experiences:

- 'hands-on, practice-relevant education,
- seeing things with your own eyes,
- teacher enthusiasm and experience,
- team working, and
- tactile, emotional experiences.'

Methodology

The study is based on individual interviews with graduates of surveying degree courses who have graduated in the last five years. The interviews are quite highly structured and carried out at the interviewee's place of work. The format and questions used are given in the next section. Some questions seek straightforward numerical data, others seek lists of subject areas that were seen as relevant (or not). The last two questions are more general and the responses describe the educational experience and in particular its transfer to work and relevance to the APC process.

The lead author is RICS Regional Training Advisor for the West Midlands, and has both good access to appropriate interviewees and detailed knowledge of the application of the APC process and the challenges it presents. He is also an experienced academic.

The first stage of the study has involved ten interviews, and this paper is based on the data obtained.

Responses

Of the 10 interviewees, 7 were male and 3 female. Age ranged between 22 and 34. 7 studied full-time and 3 on a sandwich degree.

The responses are presented under each of the questions asked.

What percentage of the undergraduate course has been directly relevant to you in your job?

Mean response: 47%; lowest 10%, highest 65%.

What percentage of the course was supportive to you in your job (but not directly relevant)?

Mean response: 34%

So you would agree the remaining percentage was not relevant to your job?

Response: Yes (100%) – suggesting 19% not relevant

Of the modules or subjects you studied, were there any that you consider to be directly relevant to your job?

4 responses: Valuations

3 responses: Property Law; Construction Technology; IT Skills; Business Management

2 responses: Measurement of land and building; Contract Administration; Health and Safety; Estate Management; Property Management

Some generic titles have been used here to clarify and group the responses. Responses made by just one interviewee are not included.

Of the modules or subjects you studied, were there any that you consider to be not directly relevant but supportive to you in your work?

3 responses: Economics; Law; Management

2 responses: Business Management; IT Skills; Development; Planning

Of the modules or subjects you studied, were there any that you feel were totally irrelevant to you in your job?

2 responses: Research Methods; Accounting and Finance

Given the experience you now have of work are there any subjects/modules that you feel should have been included in your course to help you in your job?

Here there was less consensus, and single responses have been included.

Single responses: Dilapidations and Schedules of Condition; Party Walls; Practical Management Skills; Environmental Awareness; Law; Health and Safety; Property Finance; Planning

What percentage of the undergraduate course has been directly relevant to your APC?

Mean response: 51%; lowest 0%, highest 100%.

What percentage of the course was supportive to your APC (but not directly relevant)?

Mean response: 35%

So you would agree the remaining percentage was not relevant to your APC?

Response: Yes (100%) – suggesting 14% not relevant

Of the modules or subjects you studied, were there any that you consider to be directly relevant to your APC?

4 responses: Valuations

3 responses: Property Law

2 responses: Measurement; Presentation Skills; IT Skills; Contracts

Again, some generic titles have been used here to clarify and group the responses.

Responses made by just one interviewee are not included.

Of the modules or subjects you studied, were there any that you consider to be not directly relevant but supportive to your APC?

2 responses: Construction Technology; Development Appraisal

Of the modules or subjects you studied, were there any that you feel were totally irrelevant to your APC?

2 responses: Research Methods

Given the experience you now have of the APC are there any subjects/modules that you feel should have been included in your course?

3 responses: The APC; Rules of Conduct

2 responses: Professional Practice; Practical Development Appraisal

Which APC competences should be included in a course of study?

3 responses: 'All mandatory competences'

Which competences are the most important to map a course against?

2 responses: Valuation; Landlord and Tenant; Code of Conduct; Law

Can you think of any indirect benefits that you have gained from your undergraduate degree that have helped you in your job and/or your APC?

Typical responses were: Confidence; Sense of achievement; Negotiating Skills

Do you have any further comments you would like to make?

Given the very open-ended nature of this final question, even in the context of the interview, it is note-worthy that the responses almost exclusively focus on a perceived lack of linkage between course content and the requirement of the APC.

Several comments suggest that courses should be seen more explicitly as preparation for the APC.

'Is it important that vocational courses are mapped against the APC competences? Yes, if it means that the APC is introduced on the course and is a continuation of what has been started so that the process is more familiar. Starting the APC is daunting!'

Of course university degrees must not be reduced to professional training courses, and it is interesting that in spite of the pressure to succeed in the APC some interviewees are aware of this.

'I appreciate that the APC is "on the job" training and that undergraduate study is "education" but the course does lead you to a job and a career and therefore there needs to be some link between the course and the APC and the competences'

Not all interviewees insist on a strong link between degree content and the APC, but even the response below makes the case for some input about the APC process.

'I enjoyed the course and think it's helped me in my job. My supervisor and counsellor help me with the APC and levels in the competences, so I don't think the lecturers could help very much with the APC competences. It's what you need to do when you are working not studying that's important in the APC. It would have helped though if a lecturer had talked us through the APC then it wouldn't have seemed as difficult as it first does, but when you get into it, it's fine.'

Discussion

It is interesting the percentages of course content identified as directly relevant, supportive and irrelevant are very similar in relation to preparation for work generally (respectively 48%, 34% and 19%) and specifically for the APC (51%, 35% and 14%). However it should be noted that the range of responses to question 'What percentage of the undergraduate course has been directly relevant to your APC?' was between 0% and 100%.

In many ways it is encouraging that these graduates, looking back on their experiences from the perspective of professional working life, consider that half the content of their course is directly relevant and less than one-fifth irrelevant.

Of course the specific modules or subjects identified as relevant (or not) depend on the professional specialisation of the interviewee. Consensus on the areas considered irrelevant was weak and does not carry a clear message in terms of course design. Certainly many academics would resist the suggestion that Research Methods should be dropped from honours degrees!

The subjects that interviewees felt should have been included can be grouped generically under the heading of practical profession-related skills, for example Schedules of Condition and Environmental Awareness. This highlights the importance of supporting the transition between education and professional practice. It carries the same message as the views expressed by the students reported by Frank (2005) most of whom favoured 'hands-on, practice-relevant education'.

The interviewees generally consider that coverage of subjects in undergraduate courses is suited to the requirements of the APC, but there is a strong message that courses do not prepare graduates sufficiently for the actual APC process. This also supported by the general comments which consistently highlight the perceived current lack of preparation for the APC during undergraduate studies.

This study so far suggests that higher education is largely meeting expectations. If there is a perceived shortfall it is to do with appreciating where the student are going after they leave the university. Lecturers are perhaps only looking to the end of the educational process and maybe do not appreciate the requirements of the APC and the challenges it gives to a candidate, and the role they can play in preparing them for it.

Further development

This first stage of the study has revealed the need to target specific Faculties of the RICS in identifying future interviewees. It is also intended that future interviews will probe more deeply into the indirect benefits of degree studies and how the way that interviewees learn and develop at work has been influenced by their experiences at university.

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