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Real estate graduates’ employability skills: The perspective of human resource managers of surveying firms

The perspective of human resource managers of surveying firms

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to report further on research funded by the Centre for Education in the Built Environment (CEBE) into real estate programmes of study in UK universities (Poon and Hoxley). The aim of this paper is to identify human resource managers’ view on the employability skills of real estate graduates. It also compares the views on the employability skills of real estate graduates between human resource managers, a large sample of real estate employers and real estate course directors.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper presents the research findings of eight interviews with human resource managers who work in different types of surveying firms. The approach for collecting their view of the employability skills required by real estate graduates was through gathering their opinions on three charts. These charts compare what employers feel graduates require and what they feel graduates demonstrate in 31 knowledge areas, 20 skills and 21 attributes, alongside a list of additional competencies made by graduates and employers which was developed as part of an earlier study.

Findings – The human resource managers identified the key employability skills for real estate graduates as soft skills, in particular report writing skills, communication skills, presentation skills, client care and professional standards. The human resource managers of real estate consultancy firms also voiced their concern regarding graduates’ lack of commercial awareness, which echoed the same view from real estate employers and real estate course directors mentioned in the previous research (Poon, Hoxley and Fuchs). Therefore, it is necessary for universities to embed these soft skills, such as commercial awareness in the curriculum in order to enhance the employability of graduates.

Originality/value – This paper makes an original contribution to existing literature on the identification and discussion of employability skills for real estate graduates. It describes
pioneering research focusing on the human resource managers’ perspective of the real estate graduate employability skills.

**Keyword(s):**

Employability skills; Human resource managers; Human resource management; Real estate graduates; Real estate; Graduates; United Kingdom.

### 1. Introduction

Following Lord Browne’s recommendations (Browne, 2010), university tuition fees will substantially rise from 2012. One of the impacts is that degree applicants are likely to have increased concern for their employability upon graduation. Applicants for university courses are more likely to commit to paying up to £9,000 per year to study a course which has promising career prospects than one which does not. Similarly, universities must also pay more attention to employability as it is one of the major selection criteria for students’ choice of university and course. The government also wants to enhance employability as it contributes to economic growth and competitiveness.

The Higher Education Academy (HEA) defines employability as:

[…] a set of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy (Yorke, 2006, cited in HEA, 2011).

The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) has a similar definition of employability:

[…] a set of attributes, skills and knowledge that all labour market participants should possess to ensure they have the capability of being effective in the workplace – to the benefit of themselves, their employer and the wider economy (CBI, 2010, p. 5).

There have been dramatic changes and restructuring of real estate and surveying education in the UK over the last ten to 15 years. The number of starters for real estate courses of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors’ (RICS) accredited courses has increased from 3,368 in 2000 to 9,414 in 2008 (RICS, 2010). There is also a substantial change of real estate education in Europe (D’Arcy and Taltavull, 2009). This change is particularly serious for postgraduate level due to the growing and changing European real estate market. Postgraduate student starters have increased from 13 per cent, out of all real estate course starters to 55 per cent in 2008. As a result, the requirement for typical real estate skills has transformed and there is an increasing need for economics, finance, investment and business skills. Therefore it is important to understand the employability skills required of real estate graduates.

In order to understand graduates’ employability, it is important to appreciate employers’ expectations of graduates. Previous research focusing on the employers’ technical expectations of real estate graduates were conducted in various countries over the last two decades. Gibler et al. (2002) identified the key knowledge and skills required for corporate real estate managers in Australia, Hong Kong, the UK and the USA. Epley (2004) also attempted to identify the skills and knowledge needed by corporate real estate professionals. Callanan and McCarthy (2003) surveyed the expectation of valuation and property management employers of graduates in New Zealand. Poon et al. (2011) have not only
identified the employers’ expectations of real estate graduates, but also examined the gaps between the employers’ expectations and real estate graduates’ perceptions of what graduates achieved during their studies as well as universities’ views of the content of RICS accredited real estate courses.

However, there is lack of research investigating the expectation of human resource (HR) managers from real estate graduates. Nowadays, recruitment of real estate graduates nearly always involves a two-stage process. The first stage is assessment centre based where HR managers organise a range of tests to gauge graduates’ aptitude and attitude. The second stage is competency interviews with senior technical staff in the company, such as directors or partners. In other words, HR managers play the role of “gatekeeper” for graduate recruitment. In addition, they also play an important role in the development of graduates to become surveyors as they participate in designing their RICS Assessment of Professional Competence (APC) training.

The aim of this research is to identify HR managers’ views on the employability skills of real estate graduates. This paper reports further research from a project recently completed by the author. The title of the previous research was “An Investigation into Real Estate Consultancy's Expectations of Real Estate Graduates” which was funded by the Centre for Education in the Built Environment (CEBE) Innovative Projects in Learning and Teaching Research Grant (Poon and Hoxley, 2010). The aim of that research was to investigate whether real estate graduates are equipped with knowledge, skills and attributes which meet the expectations of the real estate consultancy firms through studying RICS accredited real estate courses. The findings of the earlier research project can be found in Hoxley et al. (2011) and Poon et al. (2011). The objectives of the current paper are:

1. to identify HR managers’ expectations of graduates’ employability skills;
2. to identify the difference between HR managers’ expectations of employability skills and the skills which graduates actually demonstrate;
3. to compare the differences in view of employability skills between HR managers and the large sample of real estate employers from the earlier study; and
4. to compare the views of employability skills of HR managers and real estate course directors.

2. Policy research on graduates’ employability

Employability is a topical research subject for professional organisations. The Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE) has conducted a series of studies concerning graduates’ employability in the last few years. Forbes and Kubler (2002) conducted a pilot project to examine employers’ perceptions on the skills developed through undergraduate study and evaluate how far these skills are reflected in the benchmark statements produced by the major subject areas. The benchmark statements represent general expectation on the standards for the award of qualifications at a given level. Forbes and Kubler (2002) concluded that the employers have placed a strong emphasis on business and commercial awareness, in addition to personal qualities such as drive, enthusiasm and achievement, on graduates’ recruitment. The generic competencies identified in this report are classified under four headings: professional and business, information handling, interpersonal and self-application. A total of 85 per cent of the respondents (i.e. 22 employers) for the Forbes and Kubler’s (2002) survey explicitly expressed “commercial awareness” as an additional competence under the professional and business category.
The HEA and CIHE (2006) compiled the *Student Employability Profiles*. The competencies mentioned in this profile have then been mapped against input from the CIHE employer membership regarding the employability skills, competencies and attributes which they valued at recruitment. The six competencies mentioned in this profile are cognitive skills, generic competencies, personal capabilities, technical ability, business and/or organisation awareness and practical elements. The focus for business and/or organisation awareness is about:

Having an appreciation of how businesses operate through having had (preferably relevant) work experience. Appreciation of organisational culture, policies, and processes through organisational understanding and sensitivity. Ability to understand basic financial and commercial principles (Commercial awareness, Financial awareness, Organisation understanding) (HEA and CIHE, 2006, p. 4).

Archer and Davison (2008) from CIHE conducted research to identify what employers think of and want from their graduate employees. Their findings were based on responses received from 233 employers employing over 750,000 people, comprising 43 per cent small companies (with fewer than 100 employees), 27 per cent medium companies (with between 101 and 1,000 employees) and 30 per cent large companies (with over 1,000 employees). Hence the survey captured views from a wide variety of companies.

The skills identified by employers in this report are: integrity, intellectual ability, confidence, character/personality, planning and organisation skills and analysis and decision-making skills (Archer and Davison, 2008). This report also revealed employers’ dissatisfaction in descending order of importance with: lack of commercial awareness, analysis and decision-making skills, communication skills, literacy (i.e. good writing skills), passion, relevant work experience, planning and organisational skills, confidence and personal development skills. This report revealed “commercial awareness” has the largest important dissatisfaction gap as rated by employers. The importance rank for commercial awareness is 13 but the satisfaction rank is 33, which shows a gap of −20. At the same time, commercial awareness is identified as one of the competencies required for competing globally (Archer and Davison, 2008).

Connor and Brown (2009) from CIHE engaged in research to explore the value of graduates from the employers’ perspective. Their findings suggested that specific specialist skill and subject knowledge plus more generic personal skills such as analytical thinking, research, communication and planning skills as well as bringing in new ideas, added the most substantial value to the employers. They concluded that further efforts are needed by higher education institutions to ensure that graduates and postgraduates develop the capacities that business want, especially through more work experience and contact with employers.

Connor et al. (2010) from CIHE undertook research to investigate the qualities that senior managers and HR directors value in postgraduates. The data were collected from the senior managers and the HR directors of 56 businesses, being 40 responses to an on-line questionnaire survey and 16 responses through interviews. The employers rated “analytical thinking” and “problem solving skills” as the most important criteria when recruiting staff with a Masters’ Degree. The other attributes listed in order of importance are: subject-specific specialist knowledge, research/technical skills, new ideas/help innovate, future leadership potential, maturity and guaranteed high-calibre candidates. This research also identified issues of concern to employers when recruiting postgraduate students as: lack of commercial awareness, limited work experience, limited marketing skills, unrealistic expectations, difficulty in adapting to non-academic environment and narrow focus/over-specialised.
A White Paper produced by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2005) also stated that commercial awareness is one of the top eight employable skills for business and employment. Based on extensive research among employers, the CBI published Employability and Work Experience – A Quick Guide for Employers and Students (CBI, 2010). In this report, they also identified commercial awareness as one of the core competencies that make graduates more employable. However, another report conducted by the CBI reflected that employers generally have low level of satisfaction with graduates’ commercial awareness. The CBI conducted an education and skills survey which was answered by 581 employers collectively employing over 2.5 million people, equivalent to 8 per cent of the total UK workforce (CBI with Universities UK, 2009). The findings showed that only 8 per cent of respondents rate themselves as being highly satisfied with graduates’ commercial awareness.

A report published by National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA), National Council for Graduate Entrepreneurship (NCGE) and CIHE in 2008 (NESTA et al., 2008a) stressed the importance of entrepreneurship education and the importance of incorporating commercial awareness in university’s curriculum. They warned that unless universities embed entrepreneurship education in all parts of university life, they risk losing out to fierce international competition.

Keith Herrmann, deputy chief executive of the CIHE stated:

Pure business skills are no longer sufficient. To add value to the workplace, graduates will need to distinguish themselves by developing entrepreneurial skills that enable them to seize and exploit opportunities, take risks, think strategically, work flexibly, manage complexity, and acquire the more generic employability skills needed for the workplace, such as team working, communication skills, and commercial awareness (NESTA et al., 2008a, p. 1).

NESTA et al. (2008b) published a report Developing Entrepreneurial Graduates, Putting Entrepreneurship at the Centre of Higher Education. This report proposed a framework specification which embeds practical mechanisms to a broad range of real-life entrepreneurship experience, with the aim to enhance students’ understanding of business and generic employability skills for the workplace. The purpose of this framework is to address the central challenge for student learning experience, that is to encourage them to re-learn from experience, explore theory and practice and focus on commercial awareness and new venture creation skills that can be deployed in any context.

Please see Table I for a summary of employability skills identified in policy research.

3. Definition of commercial awareness

As discussed in Section 2, commercial awareness is one of the key employability skills. It is also suggested including commercial awareness in the university curriculum in order to enhance graduates’ competitiveness (NESTA et al., 2008a, b). There is no consent on the definition of commercial awareness. However, the commonly used definitions of commercial awareness are discussed in this section.
HEA and CIHE (2006) identified commercial awareness as:

Understands the economics of the business. Understands the business benefits and commercial realities from both the organisation’s and the customer’s perspectives (customer, supplier, employer, employee and stakeholder etc.) (HEA and CIHE, 2006, p. 15).

HEA and CIHE (2006, p. 15) also identified the characteristics of the people who are good at commercial awareness. These people are able to:

- demonstrate breadth of awareness of business knowledge (e.g. recognises issues in finance, sales, marketing);
- show consideration of such business implications as increased revenue/profit, decreased expenditure, increased productivity, improved company image and market share;
- identify new business opportunities;
- take commercial constraints into account;
- are able to analyse financial trends (e.g. revenue, profit and productivity) and forecast accordingly;
- show an awareness of commercial activity;
- show an awareness of competitive products and services and market trends; and
- identify ways to reduce costs.

The other most often quoted definition for commercial awareness in literature is given by Stoakes (2011), which is:

[...] commercial awareness is about being able to talk to clients, finding out what they want, why they want it, what they will do with it and what they are prepared to pay, and then delivering it in the way they want [...] To do that you need to understand how organisations work, the issues they face and the role of people within them.

The author conducted a research to investigate HR managers’ perspective on commercial awareness. Their definition of commercial awareness can be characterised as:

- “aware of the bigger picture within which the whole business operates, understanding new trends and understand how this impacts upon service to clients” and
- “understand the cost of providing services including consideration of time inputs”.

The findings of the research with HR managers will be discussed further in Section 6 of this paper.

4. Academic research on employability

Employability is also an important research topic in academia. Baker and Henson (2010) studied the employability skills development in research-intensive universities. Fallows and Steven (2000) evaluated a university-wide employability skills initiative. Clark (2007) explored the changing concept of employability and proposed a new definition which reflects the critical variables that contribute at an individual level. The HEA has published two series of guidance notes on learning and employability. These guidance notes cover issues including employability and higher education (Yorke, 2006) and embedding employability into curriculum (Knight and Yorke, 2006). This demonstrates that academics also have great concern for employability as it directly affects students’ choice of course and possibly the reputation of the university.
There is also research into employability which is subject based or geographically focused. Nilsson (2010) explored how engineering graduates perceive, invest in, manage and develop their employability. Bhanugopan and Fish (2009) investigated the important technical and business skills and personal attributes for “employability” of undergraduate business students. Zhiwen and van de Heijden (2008) assessed the impact of business educational reform requirements on enhancing the employability of business graduates in China.

Employability is also an important topic in the built environment sector. Davies et al. (1999) and Wong et al. (2007) conducted research to investigate employers’ expectations of construction and surveying undergraduates in Hong Kong. Massyn et al. (2009) conducted research to investigate whether construction management graduates in South Africa have the competencies that the industry needs. Gibler et al. (2002) and Epley (2004) have researched the employability skills required for corporate real estate professionals while Callanan and McCarthy (2003) researched the employability skills required for valuation and property management professionals.

5. Research methodology

5.1 Development of the project research tool

As mentioned in Section 1, this paper reports on the follow-up research of a CEBE-funded research project (Poon and Hoxley, 2010) which focused on investigating real estate consultancies’ expectation of real estate graduates. In the previous research, the researchers developed a list of 72 characteristics which consists of 31 knowledge areas, 20 skills and 21 attributes. Two questionnaire surveys were conducted with recent graduates of real estate courses who completed their courses within the last five years and real estate employers; the number of respondents were 639 and 62, respectively.

After adopting profile analyses to analyse the questionnaire data, three charts were produced (see Figure 1-3). Figure 1 shows the comparison of knowledge that employers feel graduates require and graduates feel they acquired during their studies, while Figure 2 and 3 show the comparison of skills and attributes, respectively. In addition, graduates and employers at the earlier study also made additional comments on the competencies which they think are important for graduates’ employment. These competencies can be grouped under the following headings and they are presented in an ascending order:

- practical knowledge/experience;
- specific subject knowledge, such as construction techniques, law and valuation;
- people skills, such as interpersonal and networking skills;
- general skills, such as writing, communication, information technology and numeracy skills;
- programs should provide information on careers option and RICS APC;
- technical skills, such as measurement and drawing skills; and
- attributes, such as motivation and confidence.

5.2 Interviews with RICS accredited courses providers

The second stage of data collection for the previous CEBE funded project (see Hoxley et al., 2011; Poon et al., 2011) was achieved by interviewing five RICS accredited real estate courses providers. These five course directors of RICS accredited courses were selected as
they are from universities which have long-standing reputations for delivering successful RICS accredited courses in real estate, both at postgraduate and undergraduate levels. They consist of both pre-92 and post-92 universities. They are located in different geographical regions of the UK and some of them have a high proportion of international students on their courses. The academics were invited to state their observations and opinions of the three charts and the additional comments made by graduates and employers. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded and similar themes identified. The difference between the HR managers’ and academics’ comments on employability skills of real estate graduates will be discussed in Section 6.4.

5.3 Interviews with HR managers

Eight HR managers who all work in London-based major surveying firms were interviewed. They were selected with the aim of ensuring that there was a balance of interviewees from different types of firms in order to gain views on the different requirements of graduate recruitment. Care was taken to ensure that the interviewees were experienced HR managers with knowledge of real estate graduate recruitment and development in order to provide insightful comments on the employability skills required for real estate graduates. All interviewed HR managers have been involved in real estate graduate recruitment fairs and have delivered recruitment talks to the majority of the UK universities which provide real estate courses.

The HR managers are coded as HR Managers 1-8. HR Manager 1 and HR Manager 2 are working in international firms which have offices across the world, HR Managers 3-5 are working in surveying firms which have offices in the UK and across Europe, HR Manager 6 is working in a UK-based surveying firm, HR Manager 7 is working in a national estate agency firm and HR Manager 8 is working in a banking corporate organisation which has specialisation in real estate.

To provide a context for the survey, some background information was sought at the beginning of the formal interview. These questions included:

- On average, how many real estate graduates does your company employ every year?
- What is the proportion between real estate graduate surveyors graduating from undergraduate and from postgraduate courses?
- How many real estate graduate surveyors are employed in your company?
- How long have you been a HR manager in the surveying firm?

Interviews with the HR managers were conducted by the author and another colleague of the same institution (see “Acknowledgement”). An e-mail was sent out to invite the HR managers to participate in the research project and this was followed up with telephone calls where necessary. At the start of the interviews, the interviewers asked background information of the HR managers and their companies, stated the context of the research and explained the three charts and the list of additional comments made by graduates and by employers. The HR managers were given time to understand the charts and the additional comments and, where necessary, the interviewers gave further explanation. During the interviews, the HR managers were also invited to comment on the findings of the employers’ view on real estate graduates knowledge, skills and attributes, which were presented in the charts and the additional comments. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded and similar themes identified.
6. Research findings

6.1 HR managers’ expectation of graduates’ employability skills

Overall, the HR managers agreed the identified 72 characteristics are essential for graduates’ employment. In other words, their comments are broadly in agreement with the results of the previous research.

The HR managers give prominence to soft skills over technical knowledge. The author is not surprised with this comment as HR managers are responsible for testing graduates’ soft skills at the first-stage selection process while the technical skills are usually tested by the senior technical employees at interviews during the second-stage selection process. Also, HR managers involved in this research are all working in major real estate consultancies and these firms have resources to develop the technical skills of graduates; therefore they have less concern over any shortcomings. On the other hand, they have more concern for graduates’ skills and attitude. Based on their experience, the HR managers concluded that the graduates who have good skills and attributes are more able to develop technical skills. Also, there is a common agreement that it is difficult to develop a person’s soft skills. HR managers also commented that work experience is very important. It is not necessary for the work experience to have been in a surveying firm; any type of experience is welcome.

The soft skills particularly mentioned by HR managers are writing skills, communication skills, presentation skills and client care. The HR managers explicitly stated their expectation of good technical report writing skills, they said “putting things down in a report factually or succinctly is different from academic writing”. This comment further echoed the findings of some of CIHE’s research such as Archer and Davison (2008) and Connor and Brown (2009). The HR managers also gave serious attention to graduates’ ability to speak and write in a second language. The second language concerned is not only restricted to European languages including German, French and Spanish but also other non-European languages such as Chinese. Real estate is a global business and China is becoming a major international market; having the ability to speak their language would enhance graduates’ employability in their market.

The HR managers consider that client care should be placed in a much more important position. They commented that “the property sector is a people business”; therefore client satisfaction is very important. HR Manager 8 summarised their emphasis on client care, she said:

[…] client care should not be something that is needed to be taught at employment. It is something that graduates are expected to be able to do it from the first day of employment.

The other key soft skill to which HR managers pay high attention is “professional practice and ethics”. The HR managers shared the same view as previous research, that is, the general public has confidence in professionals, not only due to their technical expertise but also because of their high ethical standards (Poon, 2006). Obviously, the ethical standards of surveyors are governed by the RICS Rules of Conduct (RICS, 2011a, b) and all members of the RICS are obliged to follow them.
HR managers from different backgrounds also demonstrated different preferences to employability skills. HR Manager 7 who works in estate agency commented the most important employability skill that she is looking for in graduates is “motivation”. She stated: 

[…] if the graduates have motivation, they will be determined and willing to take on any challenges.

HR managers have placed great emphasis on the importance of commercial awareness for graduates. They commented that commercial awareness is one of the top three recruitment selection criteria and it is tested at various stages of the application process. However, they generally feel that graduates are usually insufficiently prepared and graduates from bachelor courses and master courses demonstrate no difference in their level of commercial awareness. This view is reinforced by the fact that graduates are usually only interested in working in investment or finance departments which they see as the core services for real estate surveyors but are less interested in working in other departments. This reflects the graduates’ lack of a holistic view on the operation of the whole company and that they have a “narrow” definition of the role of real estate surveyors. HR Manager 3 even commented that all graduates she has employed have poor commercial awareness. HR Manager 5 was the exception, she commented that graduates from postgraduate courses have better commercial awareness as they have done a non-cognate degree and they have wider academic exposure. The HR managers’ definition of commercial awareness was stated in Section 3. Their identified characteristics for commercial awareness can be summarised as “aware of bigger picture” and “being cost conscious”.

One of the conclusions drawn in Section 2 is that commercial awareness is an important employability skill. Some major global companies, such as KPMG also explicitly states the importance of commercial awareness in their graduate recruitment. Rachel Pickles, Graduate Recruiter for KPMG stated:

We need commercially aware graduates in order to better understand the drivers behind clients’ own financial results and to offer a high quality service to our clients. A commercially aware graduate would also find their job more interesting (Manchester University, 2011).

Andy Moverley, UK Graduate Recruitment Manager of IBM has similar views to Rachel Pickles. He stated:

Our most successful graduates have a distinct set of characteristics and a clear focus on delivering exceptional service to our clients. These characteristics or competencies include a passion for our business plus a strong client focus requiring an understanding of our customers’ needs and requirements. These competencies reflect a requirement for commercial awareness plus an understanding of IBM and its industry in order to succeed as one of our graduates (Manchester University, 2011).

These two quotes demonstrate that HR managers in real estate consultancies share the same view as recruitment managers in other sectors in their expectation of graduates’ competency. They all pay high regard to client focus and to commercial awareness.

6.2 Difference between HR managers’ expectation of employability skills and the skills which graduates actually demonstrate

As mentioned in Section 6.1, the HR managers expect a high level of soft skills, especially report writing skills and commercial awareness, from graduates. However, graduates do not seem to demonstrate a high standard of these skills. On the other hand, graduates
demonstrated some unwelcome qualities to HR managers such as appearing over-confident and even arrogant. The interviewed academics provided an explanation on this point, they commented that “the relative inexperience of graduates explains why employers perceived them as being over-confident or possibly arrogant. The graduates are new to the working environment and possibly may over-estimate their abilities”. In addition, HR managers were also surprised by the survey findings of the previous study (see Poon et al., 2011) that graduates do not recognise e-mails as a kind of formal communication.

The HR managers were not surprised by the overall results of the questionnaire study. They feel that graduates are still in the process of learning so it is unavoidable that they demonstrate fewer competencies than employers expect. On the other hand, the HR managers think the gap between the employers’ expectations and graduates’ demonstration of knowledge, skills and attributes are too high. They commented that the employers have unrealistic expectations from graduates. HR Manager 5 summarised this view in her quote: “it is not fair to expect graduates to have management skills as they are still very raw”.

6.3 Comparison of the differences in view of employability skills between HR managers and real estate employers

The major differences between the HR managers’ view of employability skills with real estate employers is that HR managers focus on soft skills while employers focus on technical skills. HR managers and real estate employers have several areas of divergence in the ranking of some knowledge, skills and attributes. HR managers think property law should be ranked higher as it is related to commercial awareness. This is also the case for professional practice and ethics, IT skills, report writing skills, written communication, numeracy and second language should be placed higher in the ranking. In Section 6.1, it was noted that surveyors are required to write accurately therefore good report writing skills are essential.

The HR managers also commented that motivation and creativity should be ranked more highly. This comment contrasts with the findings of the academic interviews and the questionnaire surveys where they do not show a high preference for these two skills. The HR managers also think that graduates’ integrity and honesty are important qualities. Integrity and honesty are essential qualities for surveyors and they are the key ethical behaviours identified in the RICS Rules of Conduct for Members (RICS, 2011a) in which, of course, APC candidates are assessed. The HR managers were also surprised to see “willingness to accept responsibility” ranked so low. In their experience, they find graduates as being very willing to accept responsibility and may, at times, be considered over-confident (see Section 6.2).

6.4 Comparison between the views of employability skills of HR managers and real estate course directors

The HR managers shared some similar views with the interviewed academics. They agreed that leadership should have a lower ranking because graduates are in relatively junior positions in their organisations and new to their posts, therefore, they may not have the opportunity to demonstrate their leadership skills in their current roles. Also, the HR managers and academics are not surprised by the overall result of the questionnaire survey, which showed gaps between employers’ expectations and graduates’ demonstration of knowledge, skills and attributes. The interviewed academics commented on the existence of these gaps by saying that their graduates also require the training provided by employers in
order to fully capture these knowledge, skills and attributes. There is still a learning curve for graduates after graduation as they still need to acquire practical knowledge in order to become qualified surveyors. This comment can be summarised by one of the interviewed academics’ observation:

Graduates are not finished products […]. To become a surveyor is not only about obtaining a degree but it is also about gaining practical experience.

As with the HR managers, the real estate course directors did not express surprise that graduates demonstrate a low level of client care. They commented that this is because graduates have not yet been fully exposed to the working environment. It may also be due to their young age, immaturity and lack of experience.

The real estate course directors shared the same view as the HR managers and raised their concern on graduates’ commercial awareness. As surveying professionals are working in a “business world”, graduates’ ability to realise commercial opportunities and obtain repeat business are important. The academic interviewees also agreed that soft skills, such as language and communication skills, are important for students’ employability. One of the interviewed academics has a particularly strong focus on a second language as the targeted employers of the graduates from his course are the London-based international surveying firms. In other words, this comment is directly affected by his institutional background.

Please see Table II for the summary of the human resource managers’ perspective on graduates’ employability.

7. Conclusion

Employability is an important issue and has become a major concern for the government, universities and graduates. Employability has different meanings and has different implications for different stakeholders. For employers, it is a variable mix of technical knowledge and soft skills which they hope to see from the graduates. For universities, they are hoping to get the right balance between technical knowledge and soft skills in order to make sure students are more employable. For the government, they hope to enhance employability in order to justify the financial commitment for students attending higher education.

The HR managers identified that the key employability skills for graduates are soft skills. They particularly mentioned the following skills: writing skills, communication skills, presentation skills, client care and professional practice and ethics. However, the HR managers of surveying firms also voiced their concern over graduates’ lack of commercial awareness. They think it is important for graduates to be commercially aware as the real estate sector is part of the broader economy, therefore it is important to understand the whole picture when providing services for clients from a property perspective. The concern for graduates’ commercial awareness was already raised by real estate employers and real estate course directors in the previous CEBE-funded study conducted by Poon and Hoxley (see Hoxley et al., 2011; Poon et al., 2011). Therefore, it is important for universities to pay more attention by enhancing the components of commercial awareness in the curriculum in order to help students develop better employability skills.
8. Suggestions for future research

A suggested future research area is to conduct further research on the commercial awareness of real estate graduates. The interviewed HR managers gave brief definition of commercial awareness. It is important to conduct a wider survey with various stakeholders, including employers and real estate course directors, in order to develop a taxonomy of commercial awareness and identify its constituent components. It is also essential to identify the types of knowledge, skills and attributes required for the development of commercial awareness, so the graduates can have a better idea of what competencies they have to develop in relation to commercial awareness. Finally, it is also important to evaluate how and to what extent the UK RICS accredited real estate undergraduate and postgraduate courses do develop graduates’ commercial awareness. It is equally importantly to identify students’ perceptions of how their programs of study help to support and develop their commercial awareness. The real estate course providers can use this information to benchmark and self-evaluate the sufficiency of coverage for commercial awareness in their courses and to improve it where necessary. The proposed evaluation of “how commercial awareness is embedded in real estate courses” has addressed Connor and Brown (2009) and NESTA et al. (2008a,b) suggestion to higher education institutions on “making further efforts to ensure that graduates develop the capacities that business want and enhancing entrepreneur education”. The research findings of the future research also provide students with a greater understanding of the complexity of commercial awareness and an opportunity to evaluate and define their developmental needs.
Figure 1 Comparison of knowledge that employers feel graduates require and graduates feel they acquired during their studies

Notes: Knowledge areas are ordered from highest rated to lowest rated – employers response; --> indicates a statistically significant difference ($p<0.01$)
Notes: Skills are ordered from highest rated to lowest rated – employers response; $\rightarrow$ indicates a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.01$)

Figure 2 Comparison of skills that employers feel graduates require and graduates feel they acquired during their studies
Figure 3 Comparison of attributes that employers feel graduates require and graduates feel they acquired during their studies.

Notes: Attributes are ordered from highest rated to lowest rated – employers response; --> indicates a statistically significant difference (p < 0.01)
The generic competencies identified in this report are classified under four headings:
- Professional and business
- Information handling
- Interpersonal
- Self-application

Their report concluded that the employers have placed a strong emphasis on business and commercial awareness, in addition to personal qualities, on graduates' recruitment.

HEA and CIHE (2006)
HEA and CIHE (2006) compiled the Student Employability Profiles and competencies mentioned in this profile are classified under six categories:
- Cognitive skills
- Generic competencies
- Personal capabilities
- Technical ability
- Business and/or organisation awareness
- Practical elements

The focus for business and/or organisation awareness is about ability to understand basic financial and commercial principles.

Archer and Davison (2008)
The employability skills identified by employers in this report are:
- Integrity
- Intellectual ability
- Confidence
- Character/personality
- Planning and organisational skills
- Analysis and decision-making skills

Employers' dissatisfaction with graduates' competencies, in descending order of importance with:
- Lack of commercial awareness
- Analysis and decision-making skills
- Communication skills, literacy (i.e., good writing skills)
- Passion
- Relevant work experience
- Planning and organisational skills
- Confidence
- Personal development skills

Connor and Brown (2009)
Employability skills identified in this report which add most substantial value to employers are:
- Specific specialist skill
- Subject knowledge
- Generic personal skills such as analytical thinking, research, communication and planning skills
- Ability to bring in new ideas

The report concluded that further efforts are needed by higher education institutions to ensure graduates and postgraduates develop the capacities that businesses want.

Connor et al. (2010)
The most important qualities rated by senior managers and human resource directors at recruitment are:
- Analytical thinking
- Problem solving skills
- Subject-specific specialist knowledge
- Research/technical skills
- Generate new ideas/help to innovate
- Future leadership potential
- Maturity
- Demonstrated guaranteed high-calibre potential

Issues of concern to employers at recruitment are:
- Lack of commercial awareness
- Limited work experience
- Limited marketing skills
- Unrealistic expectations
- Difficulty in adapting to non-academic environment
- Narrow focus/over-specialized
Table I  Summary of employability skills identified in policy research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Human resource managers’ expectation of graduates’ employability skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agree the identified 72 characteristics (i.e. 31 knowledge areas, 20 skills and 21 attributes) are essential for graduates’ employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give prominence to soft skills over technical knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concluded that graduates who have good skills and attributes are more able to develop technical skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commonly agree it is difficult to develop a person’s soft skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work experience is very important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduates’ ability to speak and write in a second language is important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great emphasis on the importance of commercial awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference between human resource managers’ expectation of employability skills and the skills which graduates actually demonstrate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR managers expect a high level of soft skills but graduates do not seem to demonstrate it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduates demonstrated some unwelcome qualities to HR managers, such as appearing over-confident and even arrogant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparison of the differences in view of employability skills between human resource managers and real estate employers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR managers and real estate employers have major different view on employability skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR managers focus on soft skills while employers focus on technical skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR managers have the following comments:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property law, motivation and creativity should be ranked higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank soft skills higher than real estate employers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduates’ integrity and honesty are important qualities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surprised to see “graduates’ willingness to accept responsibility” ranked so low by real estate employers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table II  Summary of the human resource managers’ perspective on graduates’ employability

References


Confederation of British Industry (CBI) with Universities UK (2009), Future Fit: Preparing Graduate for the World of Work, CBI, London.


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