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Commercial Management & Quantity Surveying
Defining the name

David Pearson, CM 13 August 1996, asked the question: contractor’s qs or financial manager, what’s in a name? He suggests that the contractor’s quantity surveyor is now cast in the role of a financial manager providing financial control of projects. This he maintains requires a detailed understanding of a project’s financial arrangements, the skills to operate within financial constraints and the need to be commercially aware. This re-evaluation implies a function far removed from the traditional image of the contractor’s quantity surveyor.

In 1989 a consortium of the United Kingdom’s leading construction companies invited selected universities to submit proposals for a new degree programme in quantity surveying. The new programme was to prepare graduates for the wider aspects of their commercial activities. The Department of Building Engineering at UMIST was chosen to develop the first programme. The programme commenced in October 1990 with a second similar programme starting at Loughborough University of Technology a year later.

An objective of the programme was to appeal to high academic achievers, those who would otherwise be attracted to a career in accountancy or the legal profession. It was considered that the title quantity surveyor did not adequately describe the dynamic position that graduates would ultimately fulfil. The programme developers were eager, therefore, to devise an appropriate title for the programme. It was considered that the term quantity surveyor gave the impression of a technical role, involving measuring and valuing. After consultation, the title ‘Commercial Manager’ was considered to be the most appropriate. Hence the programme was called Commercial Management and Quantity Surveying (CM&QS). It did, however, present the programme team with a problem, what did we really mean by the term ‘Commercial Management’. This quest for meaning led to a research project funded by Enterprise in Higher Education (EHE) the results of which are to be published shortly.

The investigation concluded that commercial management within the construction industry could be defined as ‘looking after the profits of the company... by keeping the costs to a minimum and maximising income’. Further, the following skills and competencies were inherent in commercial managers: logical thinking, analytical ability, numerical skills, and the technical skills and knowledge associated with quantity surveying. In addition to these skills a ‘good’ commercial manager was thought to be competent in the following: managing the company or project cash flow; the ability to take a broad perspective and to think laterally; analysing risks, which incorporates being proactive, assessing the potential cost of a risk and solving any problems associated with it; negotiating; communicating; and team working.

Having derived a working definition of commercial management the programme team were then faced with the question: could the skills and competencies attributed to the commercial manager be delivered within the programme content? The general feeling of those interviewed was that these skills and competencies were acquired through ‘experience on the job’. Despite this, however, it was suggested that if it was possible students should be given a grounding in the skills mentioned, although a theoretical approach would not suffice. Simulation was suggested as a way of
achieving this, thereby, allowing students to experience a situation where they could analyse risks, solve problems, search for information and make a profit on a project.

The abilities of the commercial manager as described above can be subdivided into two main areas decision making skills and interpersonal skills. However, in addressing the most appropriate methods of fostering these abilities and skills the programme team was required to consider implications that fell between their initial remit, i.e., the provision of a broad rigorous education (university) and vocational training (the construction organisation). Traditional universities like UMIST have usually dealt with knowledge rather than skills and abilities, however the implication of the investigation was that a theoretical approach would not be the most appropriate method for delivering the necessary skills and abilities required of the commercial manager. While there has, generally, been a move towards the use of tutorials, seminars and student centred or project based learning, it would appear that more attention was required in focusing on student learning than teaching to develop a student's capability in commercial management.

Mechanisms through which students could develop the skills and abilities of the commercial manager by experiential learning were incorporated into the course. These include: an outdoor management development course, role-play and simulation, and supervised work experience. However, to maximise the student’s ability to learn through experience an introduction to personal and academic development planning and other methods of enhancing learning from experience id provided.

The programme is now well established and widely recognised as producing graduates of the highest calibre. Pearson contends that the Chartered Institute of Building offers a logical ‘home’ for the contractor’s quantity surveyor. Therefore, while the programme is accredited by the RICS, it is hoped that it may receive accreditation by the CIOB and thereby obtain dual accreditation.

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