



## Guest Editorial

# STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS GAPS IN THE SUPPLY AND DEMAND OF SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE IN BUILT ENVIRONMENT-RELATED DISCIPLINES

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Educational strategies and policies at both national and global levels contribute significantly to shaping the future direction of many professions and industries. With existing knowledge and skill sets becoming rapidly out-dated, the continual need for upgrading them is generally acknowledged and this creates opportunities for their development and dissemination.

Given the sector's large, diversified and dynamic nature, the upgrading of knowledge and skills for the built environment sector poses many challenges. The training and educational programmes not only need to cover the depth and breadth of many professions, but also need to reflect the rapidly changing technological, environmental, economical and social dimensions of the sector (see: Abbott and Allen, 2005).

Studying at higher education institutions (HEIs) is a primary mode of knowledge and skills enhancement for built environment professionals. While this mode is widely adopted

and accepted, it has often been criticised for its weak recognition of and correlation to the changing needs of industry and its inability to respond rapidly to emerging knowledge and skills demands (see: Kaklauskas et al., 2012).

This themed issue of the *International Journal of Strategic Property Management* on educational strategies for built environment disciplines examines the root causes of knowledge and skills gaps in built environment-related disciplines and discusses the strategies which can be adopted to address such gaps.

In attempting to explain the findings of an investigation into the mismatch between industrial skills needs and HEI graduate competencies in Estonia, Lithuania and the United Kingdom, Witt and co-authors explore the complexities of the HEI – industry relationship in terms of knowledge and skills. They refer to the contemporary debates between 'liberal' (Tarrant I. and Tarrant J, 2004) and 'vocational' (Winch, 2002) educational perspectives and

the general education versus 'skills approach'. While accepting that there is indeed a widening gap between higher education outcomes and market needs and acknowledging the criticism, mostly from industry and the political establishment, that higher education is failing to respond and adapt adequately to economic changes, they argue that the conceptualization of this alignment problem must reflect the multiple roles and complex inter-relationships of the stakeholders and suggest that the key to improvement lies in closer HEI – industry collaboration.

It is an accepted practice within the built environment-oriented courses offered at HEIs to embed an industry placement element in the programme in order to expose the student to industry demands and to create links between industry and academia (Biggs, 2001; Tyler, 1950). Keraminiyage argues in his paper that there are issues with this arrangement from the learning experience perspective and proposes an in-module work practice strategy to improve the learning experience for students. He further evaluates the pedagogic issues of the proposed arrangement based on a case study of its implementation at the University of Salford.

While in-programme work practice arrangements can help students to relate their knowledge and skills to work place requirements, professional bodies tend to evaluate the 'competencies' of their membership to assess their capability to perform required duties. In this context, the supply and demand of knowledge and skills can be considered in a three-way assessment of collaboration between industry, academic and professional institutions (see: Perera and Pearson, 2011; Wong et al., 2007).

In their paper, Perera and co-authors present the outcomes of a mapping exercise where industry needs, competency requirements of a professional body (RICS: Royal Institution of Chartered Quantity Surveyors) and the modules covered by HEIs in the field of quantity

surveying were mapped to understand the gaps from all three view points.

Lee and co-authors provide further insight into competency levels of individual graduates and the factors which affect them. They argue that new graduates exhibit a high level of self-doubt in professional competence and that task competence is often influenced by frequency of application. They further discuss the impact of early career support that different organisations offer and its impact on early career graduates.

As new disciplines and challenges immerse within the built environment sector, the need for new knowledge, skills and competencies arises. The relatively new field of disaster management that has recently captured global attention represents a case in point (see: Kulatunga, 2010; Haigh and Amaratunga, 2009). Siriwardena and co-authors evaluate the preparedness of HEIs for catering to emerging demands for disaster management skills and knowledge and they consider the concept of lifelong learning as a means of addressing the skills and knowledge gaps within the field.

This themed issue is intended for academics, policy makers and other professionals engaged in the strategic management of educational, professional and industrial spheres of the built environment. It is anticipated that it will contribute to improved understanding of the knowledge and skills context, more effective alignment of HEI outputs with industrial needs and, ultimately, to the positive future development of the built environment sector.

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