

Tariff Entry Requirements for Surveying Degree Courses in the UK

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SUMMARY

The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS), the professional body under which the majority of surveying degree courses within the UK are accredited has introduced a tariff entry requirement for each year cohort within any one degree and institution providing that degree. The reported rationale for the introduction of this tariff is to raise the standard of those entering onto the degree course and thereby those entering the surveying profession following graduation.

Research has shown that there is little correlation between the A-level success of those entering a degree course and the final classification of their degree.

The construction industry in the UK is currently not an attractive career choice option for school leavers and admissions to construction related courses are in decline. The encouragement of young people to enter the industry and its associated professions should therefore focus on widening rather than narrowing the field, particularly at such an early formative stage.

The paper explores the application of the tariff and its negative impact on recruitment onto construction related accredited surveying degree courses with special reference to the reduction of the number of under represented groups.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last 10 years all construction and property professionals have been witness to an increasing number of reports detailing skill shortages and the decline in the numbers of people seeking to enter the construction industry. Historically, these were mainly limited to the trades and practical skills but increasingly there have been a variety of reports from professional bodies, universities, companies and industrial organisations detailing both the decline in graduate numbers and undergraduate enrolments. According to the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS 2002) the number of applications and acceptances, in the built environment subject areas, are on a downward trend and have been for many years. If all built environment courses are considered then the level of student applications and enrolments are down 25% and 7% respectively from 1996 levels. However, once only building and construction courses are considered the official UCAS statistics make grim reading. The table below shows the drop in applications and acceptances between 1996 and 2001 for the JCAS subject group K2 Building and Construction.

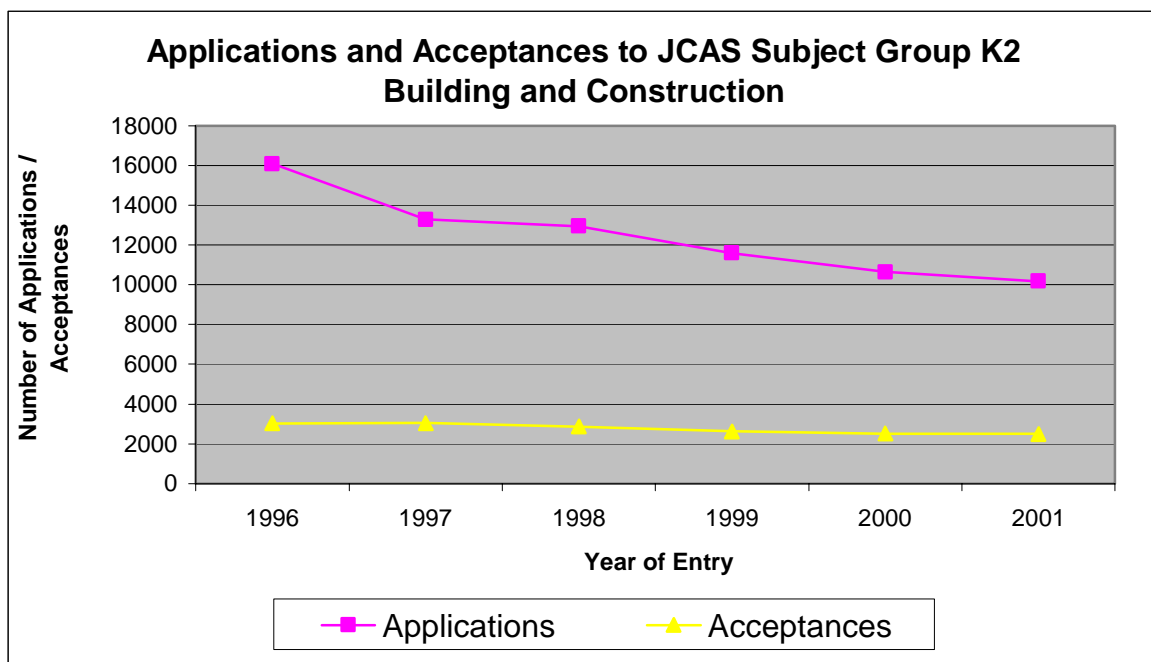


Figure 1: Applications and Acceptances to JCAS Subject Group K2 Building and Construction 1996 – 2001

Taking 1996 as the base year the reduction up to 2001 entry equates to a 40% reduction in the total number of applications and a 20% reduction in the number of undergraduates commencing study on a building or construction degree. This reduction goes against the drive by the UK Government to increase the number of students studying in further and higher

education. The UCAS figures for all subjects show that over the same period the total number of acceptances rose from 295,807 up to 358,091, an increase of 21%. If building and construction degrees enrolments had increased in line with this figure the total number of enrolments for 2001 would have been approximately 50% larger at 3,668 and not the 2,497 it actually was.

2. REDUCTION IN CONSTRUCTION GRADUATE NUMBERS

This reduction in students commencing courses is mirrored by a large decrease in the number of graduates leaving construction related courses. Although within the 5-year period there is obvious overlap such that smaller numbers entering in 1996 will have filtered through to reduce graduate numbers in 1998 or 1999, the reductions in graduate numbers start with a sharp decline in 1996 before the recent reductions in enrolments could have had an impact. Cavill (1999) found that the number of quantity surveying (QS) graduates had almost halved in the previous 5 years, leaving the profession facing a skills shortage. The number of graduates on full-time RICS-approved courses had fallen from 1103 in 1994 to 692 in 1997. This was a reduction of almost 40% over the 3 years and before the reduction in enrolments identified above took effect. An example cited by Cavill (1999) was at Reading University where the QS course application numbers peaked in 1992 at 750 but, by 1997, were down to fewer than 200. In 1999 there were only 15 final-year students studying for a QS degree, compared with 45 in 1992. On the existing cohort numbers this figure was set to drop even further to 10 graduates in 2001.

Two years later Leftly (2001) reported that the situation had not improved and that the skills crisis was worsening he stated that the 'What Do Graduates Do?' 2002 report which was published by three education bodies, namely the Career Services Unit, the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services and UCAS had identified that although Building had the most graduates at 4,272 for the 2000 academic year this was a decline of 28% compared with 1996. A Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) spokesperson was cited as saying that their initiatives were trying to halt the decline in recruitment, but that it was proving a long haul. The industry needed 370,000 people in the next five years.

“the dearth of graduates was highlighted earlier in the year, when Luton University was forced to disband its construction department because of a lack of students and the University of Glamorgan suspended its quantity surveying course after the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors withdrew accreditation, saying the college did not meet its new, tougher standards”. Leftly (2001)

Two years further on and an anonymous article titled ‘What price education?’ in Building illustrated that the problem was still present. The article drew attention to a new report sponsored by the CITB stating that the number of applications to construction degrees is in steep decline. “The Rethinking Construction Education study says that at the current rate of decline, there will be no construction student entering university by 2012”. Anon (2003).

3. CHARTERED INSTITUTE OF BUILDING (CIOB)

An important recent publication is the CIOB report 'Constructing our Future: The Way Forward for Higher Education in Construction' (2003). This study found that in the year 2003 there were 58 CIOB accredited courses in 38 institutions, which produced 884 graduates and that this figure was in general decline. In addition the study found that there had been significant changes to the mode of study with only 30% of students studying sandwich courses compared to 80% in 1990 and that part time numbers had increased from a very small base in 1990 to 30% in 2003. The report concluded that the viability of courses remained the biggest threat to construction programmes, that Construction courses alone will not meet the needs of the industry in the short/medium term and that conversion programmes for non-cognate graduates need to be developed. This last point would also help address the under representation of female industry entrants as the number of female students on construction courses remains very low at approximately 6 to 7%. The report's commentary made the observation that

"The average number of graduating students per course in 2003 is 15, which is not sustainablethe obvious outcome of which is that some providers are terminating their provision". CIOB (2003, p.4)

The findings of the Constructing our Future: The Way Forward for Higher Education in Construction report was cited (CIOB 2004) as the reason for the CIOB setting up a Presidential Commission on Construction Education. The interim report of this commission was published in January 2004 and stated that the report had raised issues that the CIOB felt could not be ignored. In particular that fact that the industry is currently experiencing serious recruitment problems which raises grave concerns regarding the future of construction education.

This identified link between dwindling undergraduate numbers and the viability of building and construction related HE schools, divisions and faculties has been illustrated earlier in the paper with an example of course closures.

"without an increase in applicants, the UK could lose the building and construction teaching, educational and research capabilities that are so highly regarded around the world". Anon (2003)

The irony of these potential and actual course closures when the industry is faced with a skill shortage, which totals almost 50,000 newly qualified professionals and managers (CITB 2002) becomes clear when the employment record and average earning of construction course graduates are compared with other sectors. It is apparent that not only does construction contribute significantly to the economy but that the majority of students that do take the plunge into construction related education are frequently rewarded by multiple job offers and attractive starting salaries.

"recent reports from the CIC and DTI revealed that the work of engineers, surveyors, architects and other consultants contributes 1.4% of the UK's GDP more than the

fashion, music, film and fashion industries combined. Which shows how crucial construction professionals are to the UK". Anon (2003)

Hilpern (2003) reports that building and construction related degrees consistently appear in the top five of graduate employment league tables which are published by UCAS and the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services in the 'What do Graduates do' reports. In the reports she states the average building and construction starting salaries are above the mean for all graduate jobs.

4. RICS – AGENDA FOR CHANGE

The RICS like the CIOB and other construction related professional bodies has been considering the question of education and the problem of attracting more entrants into their profession. In 1998 the then President of the RICS, Richard Lay, set out his vision in his presidential address "Agenda for Change" with regards to education he was

"seeking a radical shake up of the syllabus, with greater emphasis put on business and on economic issues, so that chartered surveyors are able to put their advice in a business context. He is also looking to create a truly transferable qualification, which is not wholly property specific". (RICS 1998)

The vision outlined in this address was incorporated into the work of the RICS Education Task Force that reported in 1999 in their Investing in Futures paper. The summary of this paper states (RICS 2002) that the "Vision of high quality education" in the "Agenda for Change" required a

"strong partnership between the RICS and a limited number of academic centres of excellence throughout the world characterised by: highly competitive entry to courses at undergraduate and postgraduate level". (RICS 2002, p.3)

The stated aim of this and the other summary points was to "elevate the status of the RICS qualification". The resulting five key objectives included "ensuring internationally respected standards of student selection on to RICS partnership accredited courses" and that "the RICS has access to high calibre graduate output" (RICS 2002, pp.3-4). This was translated by the RICS into minimum threshold standards that every accredited centre needed to meet. The minimum standards were

"a relevant research score of 2D, a teaching quality score with no more than one 2 score, 75% of graduating students entering relevant employment and that 75% of first year entrants should have an average A-level score of 230 UCAS points". (RICS 2002, p.7)

4.1 RICS Admissions Threshold

The new admissions requirement was met with strong opposition by many academics and practitioners who saw the new thresholds as "elitist" (Turrell 2003) and unhelpful given the

backdrop of falling construction and building related applications into HE. In particular, the use of the 'gold standard' of A-levels was seen to be a crude yardstick that would not allow admission tutors the flexibility they had previously employed to ensure that students with potential were given the opportunity to prove themselves. The opposition and the nature of the "crude indicator" was acknowledged by the RICS Assistant Chief Executive (RICS 2000) when the new plans were unveiled.

Traditionally the construction industry and its professional bodies are dominated by white males and under represented by female, ethnic minority and mature students. Over recent years construction HE departments buoyed by the need to halt the decline in student numbers, their desire to participate in the Government's drive to increase student numbers and the accompanying widening participation agenda, had managed to improve their recruitment of these particular groups. The RICS launched the 'raising the ratio' group to attempt to address the low representation of women in the profession (RICS 2003a). What has apparently been overlooked by the RICS in the drive to raise the status of the profession is that they are creating an additional barrier to entry by increasing entry standards. The new thresholds are likely to result in RICS courses potentially excluding the exact groups the government and RICS are trying to increase.

Arguably, the RICS had left the door slightly ajar for some of these groups by allowing up to 25% of the cohort to have no qualifications and by allowing the average to apply to the top 75% rather than it being the minimum for each student. The flaw in this argument is the way admission tutors actually operate and must err on the side of caution. For example, if they have a target of 20 students and gave 5 places to zero point students but then only managed to enrol 15 students in total. The top 75% now includes two students who have zero points, this may result in the average dropping below the threshold which according to the published RICS guidance would mean that accreditation is lost for that cohort. This would damage the standing of the course and obviously impact negatively on recruitment for subsequent years. The main problem with the RICS' approach was its reliance on A-levels and their equivalence and that the tariff points system is heavily weighted in favour of A-level students. This is potentially restrictive and damaging to numbers at the very time many built environment universities were facing serious problems attracting sufficient numbers.

This point was made by Cavill (1999) when the threshold concept was being developed. Cavill cited Nick Hudson the RICS' then assistant director of education as claiming that one way of raising the calibre of applicants for courses was to reduce enrolment numbers. She pointed out "with many courses teetering on the brink of closure, the idea hardly seems sensible –let alone popular – in an industry already chronically short of QS graduates". (Cavill 1999)

Due to the level and strength of opposition from Universities and various articles in the construction press including the RICS' own Estates Gazette, the RICS education director, responded claiming that the number of students commencing RICS accredited courses had risen by 17% from 3249 to 3826 between September 2000 and September 2001 (Tovey 2002). In addition he claimed the partial data set for the subsequent year showed that this trend was continuing. He detailed the increases and predicted that for September 2002 "new

starters (will) hit the 5000 mark”. The article cited two case studies to illustrate that the change in student numbers on accredited courses had increased by up to 500%. When the given data for accredited courses by specialism is examined it is clear that there were increases of around 27% in the majority of specialisms but a decrease in the Building Surveying specialism of 24%. The overall change was a rise of 18%. These figures are shown below in figure 2.

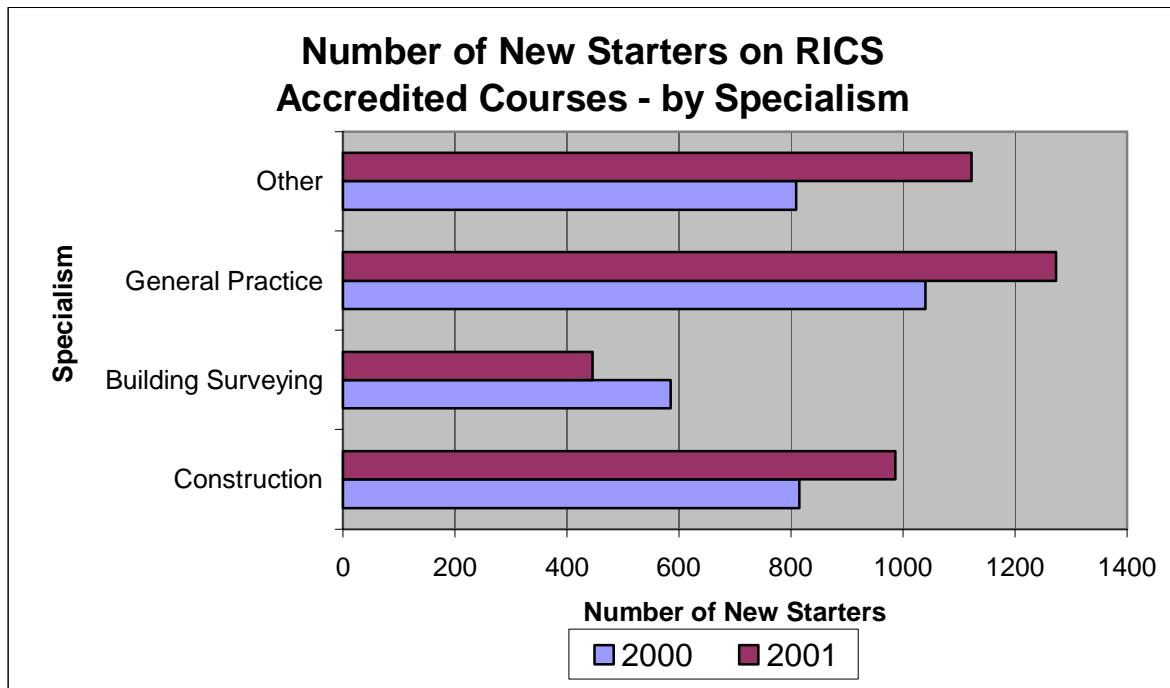


Figure 2: Number of New Starters on RICS Accredited Courses by Specialism in 2000 and 2001.

Upon examination of the data contained in the article it is apparent that post graduate and undergraduate starts have been combined and nowhere is the contribution of each sector made clear. The lack of transparency in the data made Tovey’s hypothesis highly contentious.

“by requiring the majority of students on its accredited courses to have 230 UCAS points the RICS has paradoxically increased the potential number of applicants to its accredited courses. There are more students with these grades or similar than other grades for which they personally can qualify. The net result is that the RICS has hit the mass market for students” (Tovey 2002, p.3)

Since most admission tutors select students on the basis that they have an interest in the subject they are studying it is a remarkable suggestion that the one barrier which has prevented large increases in Built Environment area enrolments over the last few years has been that the admissions criteria have been perceived as being too low.

The RICS ‘prospectus of surveying education’ (RICS 2001 and RICS 2003b) is published annually and it details all the RICS accredited centres and courses across the world. When the numbers of courses are examined over the period since the threshold came into effect it is

clear there has been a large increase in the number of UK courses from 198 in 2001 to 268 in 2003. This increase of 35% is twice the rise in enrolments but would appear to help explain why enrolments did go up. If however the rise in the numbers of courses is separated into post graduate and undergraduate then it is clear that the large increase in new courses, and one assumes new entrants, is due to a massive expansion of 89% (UK) and 52% (international) post graduate courses. The change in UK and international undergraduate courses by comparison are much more sedate at 3% and 33% respectively. The change in the number of accredited centres and courses is illustrated in figure 3 below.

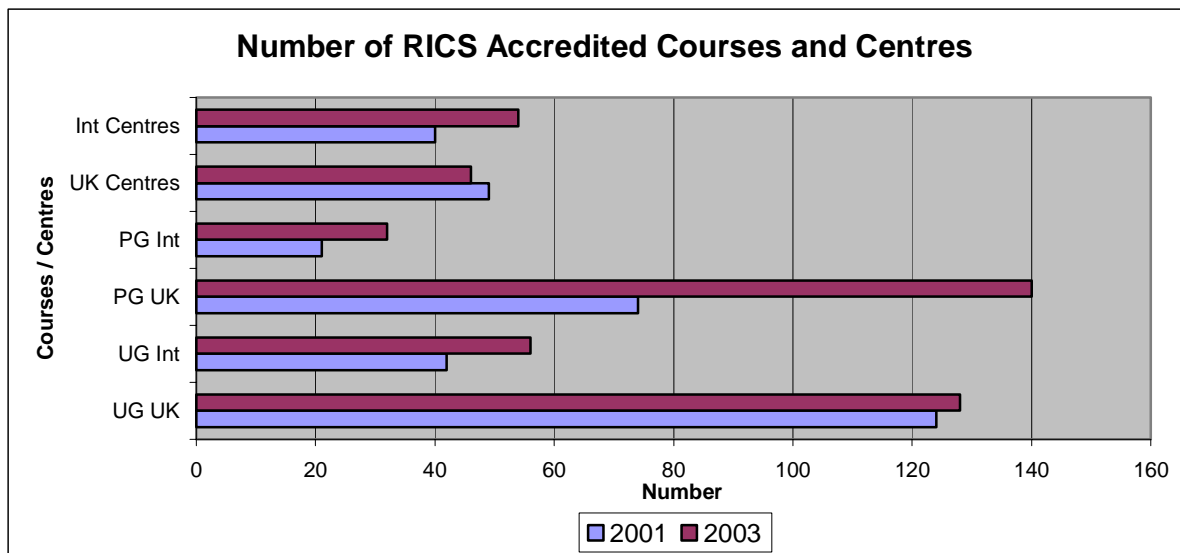


Figure 3: Change in number of accredited courses and centres between 2001 and 2003

Since the threshold was introduced there has been very little independent research and no publication of transparent underlying data. In order to inform the debate around the controversial thresholds a detailed case study was undertaken using accredited courses at a leading partnership accredited centre. This allowed examination of the impact the thresholds had on overall student numbers and widening participation groups namely; mature, female, ethnic minority and low A-level point students. In particular the question as to whether or not the thresholds have had a detrimental effect on widening participation groups was examined.

5. CASE STUDY

In order to undertake this research a detailed analysis was carried out of external and internal data that included HESA returns, UCAS statistics, examination board data, internal university statistics and datasets. This quantitative data was then supplemented with qualitative data from interviews with relevant staff including: programme leader, course leaders and admission tutors. The data analysed covered a 5-year period from 1999 to 2003, with the introduction of thresholds being the mid-point of 2001.

The research showed that the total student numbers for first year full time enrolments on construction RICS accredited courses had a marked fall for the year that the threshold came into effect. This drop is similar for both courses. There has been a degree of recovery in the

subsequent years but currently the combined total stands at just over 60% of the numbers in 1999. If the two years either side of the threshold are considered together then first year full time numbers stand 50% lower for the two years after the threshold compared with the two years before. The trend in the accredited course enrolments can be seen in figure 4 below.

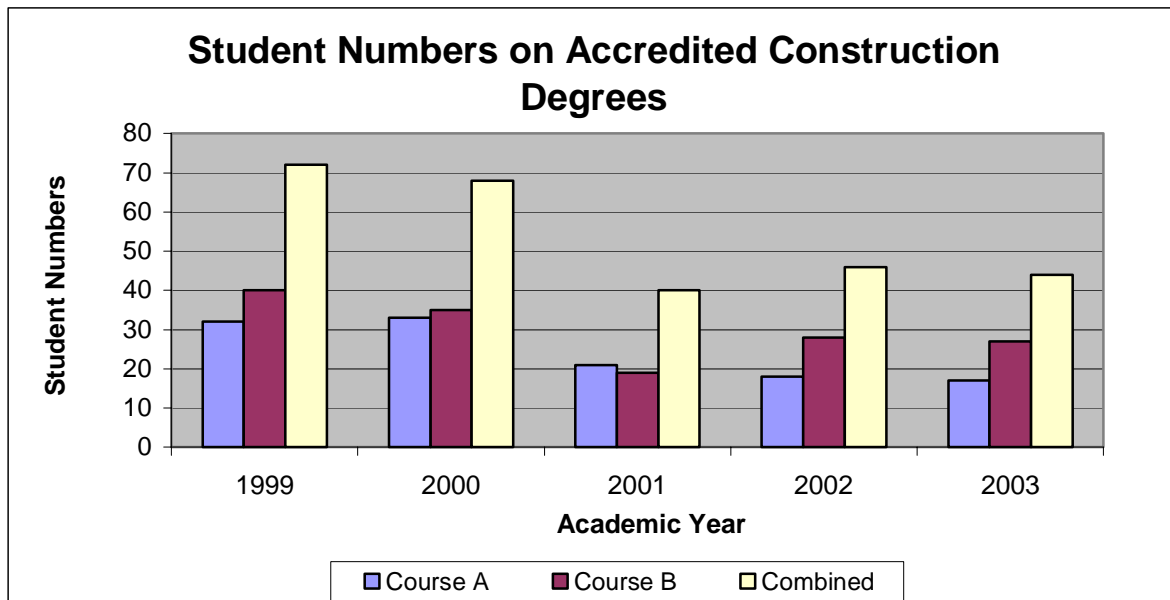


Figure 4: Student Numbers on Accredited Construction Degrees 1999 - 2003

The case study school did set up two non-accredited degrees prior to thresholds being introduced and these did recruit particularly for the 2001 entry. If TechRICS course enrolments are added to the accredited enrolments then the total numbers of first year enrolments for the threshold year onwards (2001, 2002 and 2003) are 59, 56 and 50 students respectively. These figures are at 82%, 78% and 69% of the 1999 levels. When these combined figures are compared to the building and construction enrolments of the sector it is clear that enrolments on RICS associated courses show the largest reduction. This may be due to the level of uncertainty that these students face when applying.

5.1 Ethnicity and Diversity

Analysis of the courses' equal opportunity monitoring forms for the two years up to the introduction of thresholds shows that the average number of ethnic minority students across the two construction RICS courses was 10%. The average for the two years after the introduction of thresholds is only 6.5% per year, a reduction of over 30%. These percentages mask the size of the reduction in student numbers. After 2001 the total student numbers were less and so the post threshold lower percentage is from a smaller total cohort size. Related to ethnicity and diversity is the number of overseas students on the courses. One of the two accredited courses has a consistent record of attracting small numbers of overseas students both with advanced entry and for entry to year one. Since the introduction of the thresholds the entry to year one has dropped to zero. Part of the reason for this is that establishing exact correlation of overseas qualifications with their UK equivalents is very difficult. Even if

NARIC (National Academic Recognition Information Centre) information is used then often the outcome is that although an overseas qualification may have a suitably high level of equivalence, it is across a wide band of tariff points. For example, an overseas qualification may be described by NARIC as equal to a BTEC national diploma. However there is no way to correlate the overseas scoring system with the number of merits and hence the point score. This means that these students are usually informed they are on a waiting list and their place cannot be confirmed until much later in the year. This uncertainty clearly acts as a deterrent to overseas students hoping to study in the UK.

5.2 Female Students

The average number of female students across the last five years for the accredited courses is five per year with a high of eight and a low of three. It is unfortunate but not surprising that the high is immediately before and the low immediately after the threshold introduction. The total number of female students enrolling on the first year for the two years before the threshold was thirteen (9%). In the three years since the threshold this number has still not been matched even if all three subsequent years are added together. As stated previously the RICS set up the raising the ratio committee with the aim of increasing the number of women entering and remaining in the profession. The committee report's executive summary states that

“The remit of the Raising the Ratio committee is to increase the number of women entering and remaining in the surveying profession by removing any barriers that may inadvertently exist through traditional working practices and may be preventing women from joining or staying in the profession.” (RICS 2003c, p.1)

From analysis of data in the case study it would appear that the RICS' own education policy, far from increasing the number of female applicants and entrants onto undergraduate courses is reducing the number. Many of the top students on the accredited courses have been female, and a large percentage of these students may not have been accepted onto their courses post 2001 due to their low UCAS tariff score. In particular, one first class honours student had completed a foundation course prior to studying her degree.

5.3 Non-Standard Entry Criteria

Although the RICS threshold does not exclude non-standard qualifications it does require them to be in the 25% category. This category for obvious reasons has a lot of competition and increasingly the 25% is made up of near miss A-level students who had previously accepted an admissions offer. Previous research by the authors on progression and success show better success rates for those students who have just missed their grades but who show commitment to the subject and the university when compared with much higher A-level scoring candidates who are looking for a degree in clearing. Thus the numbers and percentages of non-standard entry students have dropped since the threshold was introduced. One accredited course consistently enrolled access course students each year, but since 2001 has not enrolled a single access course student. The same trend is also found with foundation course students.

5.4 Mature Students

There is a well-established relationship with age and non-standard or low A-level point students and at the case study school there has been a strong historical recruitment from mature students (21 years and older). Generally the older the student the less likely they have studied A-levels. Interviews with both the accredited course courseleaders identified an historic track record of mature students performing well above average and attaining good honours, despite the fact that these students often have demanding financial and family commitments. The drive and commitment of these mature students puts their younger peers to shame, and over the last 5 years the top student on each award has often been a mature student with a non-standard or low A-level academic profile. Under the new threshold it is these very students that are most likely not to be accepted onto the accredited courses.

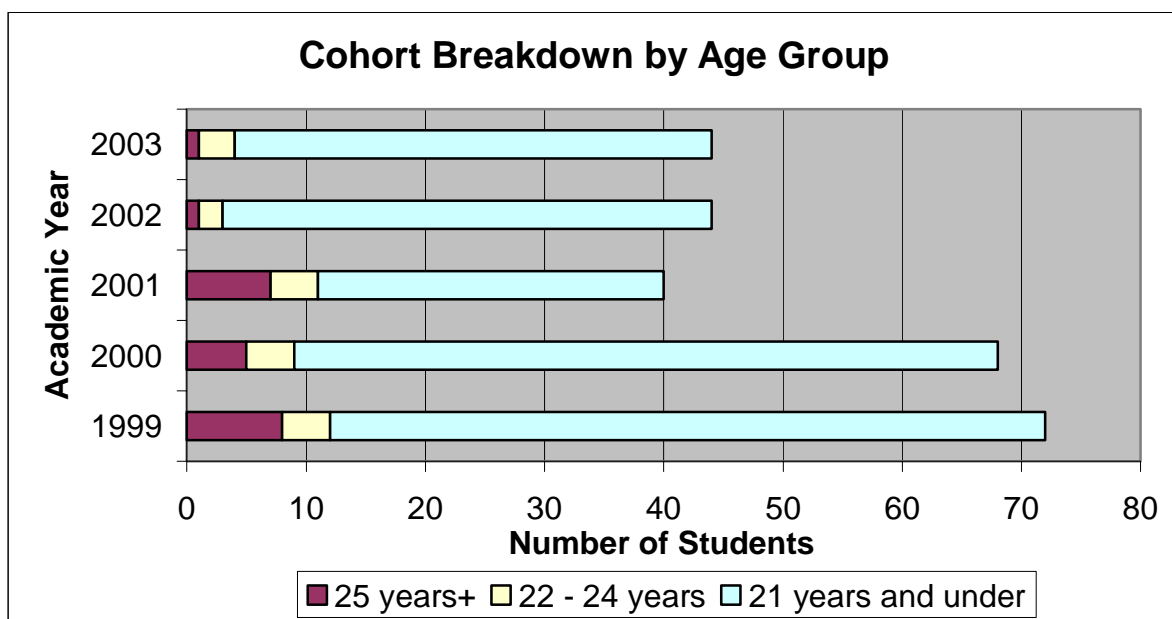


Figure 5: Cohort analysis by Age Group 1999 - 2003

As can be seen above in figure 5 the threshold year mature numbers are in line with 1999 and above 2000, however the applicants for the 2001 entry did have a much higher number of mature students and approximately half of them were not admitted onto the accredited course. If the TechRICS courses are examined then it is clear that had it not been for the threshold the actual number of mature students in 2001 on the accredited courses would have been around 50% higher.

A key aspect to the raising of entry standards and the policy of selecting the “brightest and the best” (RICS 2003a) is the assumed relationship between A-level scores and degree classification. There has been much written on this relationship over the years on both sides of the discussion. Since the students who started in 2001 have yet to complete their studies it is not possible at this time to compare degree classifications. However it is possible to look at the results from the cohorts at the end of each academic year. In line with many other HE

institutions the case study establishment designed the TechRICS course so that it shared many modules with the accredited course (80 out of 120 credits). If the larger of the two accredited courses are compared with its TechRICS alternative then meaningful and valid comparisons can be made. For the 2001 cohort it is possible to compare both year one and year two marks however for the 2002 cohort it is only possible to compare year one marks. The end of year results for each cohort show that the TechRICS students always come out on top but that there is no real difference between the two cohorts as illustrated in figure 6 below.

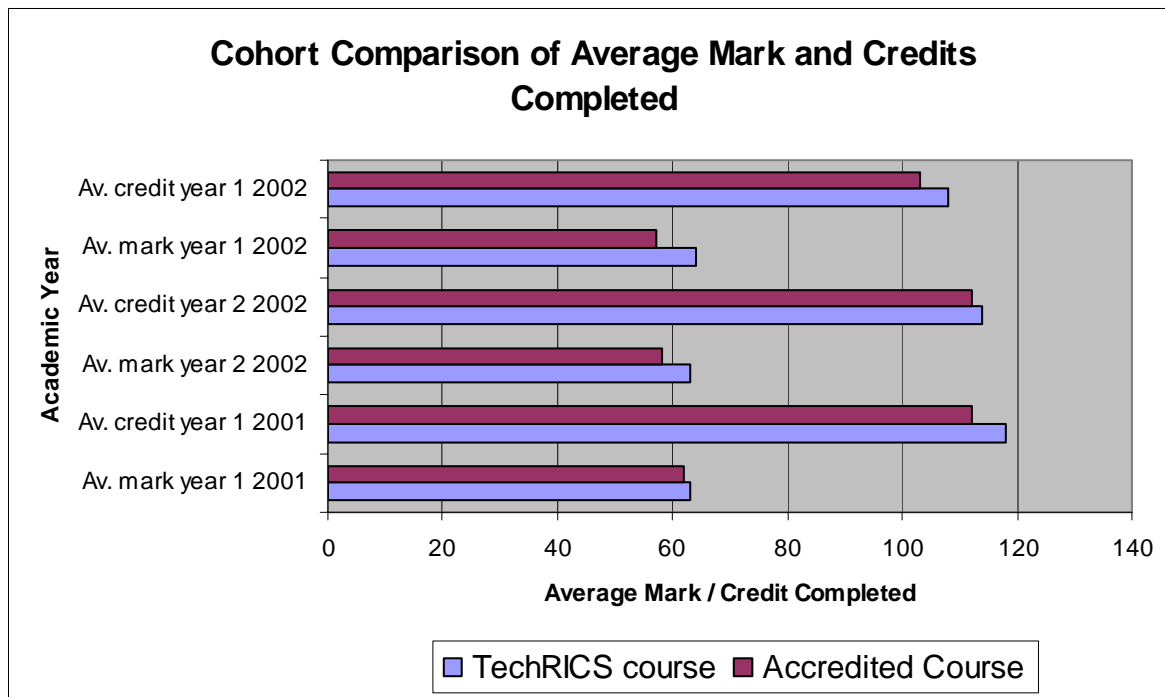


Figure 6: Cohort Comparison of Average Mark and Credits Completed 2001 -2002

6. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN A-LEVELS AND DEGREE PERFORMANCE

The perceived relationship between good A-levels and good degree performance is clearly at the heart of the RICS threshold. This debate has been running for many years and there are many papers and reports that claim to prove or disprove the link. Recent research carried out by two Professors at King’s College (Black and William, 2002) found that if the last place on a course was always given to the higher A-level student, 40% of the time you would have chosen the wrong student when their degree classifications were compared. Another research report (Bekhradnia and Thompson, 2002) cited original research that showed that “25% of graduates with weak A-levels (up to 140 points) obtained a first or upper second,” whereas “60% of those with good A-levels (300+ points) did.” This HEFCE published report also made the following points “success at university at least three years later, and in quite a different environment, could not be expected to have the same association with A-levels” and that “All should appreciate that A-level grades, like any other measurement, are not perfectly accurate”. (Bekhradnia and Thompson 2002, p2)

The most recent and wide-ranging research into the link between A-levels and degree classification was published in 2003 in the Universities UK report *Fair Enough?* This stated that there was a link between A-levels and degree performance but that it was a very small link and is almost insignificant when compared to other factors. The actual magnitude of the A-level results impact on degree performance was found to be just under 8%. This means that 92% of a student's degree performance can be attributed to factors other than their attainment at A-level. (Universities UK 2003)

All of these reports corroborate the findings of the above case study which compared the results of accredited and TechRICS students. What is clear through all of the reports and findings is that A-level grades on their own are an inconsistent and poor indicator of degree success. The *Fair Enough* report (Universities UK 2003) established four criteria that were linked to success on courses in HE. These were; self organised; works well independently; motivated to learn; and interested in the subject area. Before the threshold tariff was introduced admission tutors would assess a student's application for the potential to succeed using criteria similar to these and admit the student if they were satisfied of their potential. Since the threshold once the 25% quota is full students in this category are refused entry and left considering either a longer and more expensive route i.e. cognant degree and post graduate conversion or a change in profession.

The RICS allows non-accredited degree holders into its accredited undergraduate and postgraduate awards without asking for their A-levels points to be considered. We therefore have the potential situation whereby degree holding students the threshold tariff system would have branded 'poor quality' and 'unsuitable' to become surveyors, can still gain access to accredited awards – just so long as they can afford the additional costs.

7. CONCLUSION

The RICS threshold standard for admissions to undergraduate courses relies on an outdated and a discriminatory system that is clearly out of step with the Government's policy and current thinking in HE. In addition the threshold is clearly restricting recruitment and is speeding the decline in undergraduate numbers for construction related surveying degrees. The present 'measure of quality' of those who apply to enter the RICS is not their A-level points or even degree subject or classification, but by their Assessment of Professional Competence (APC).

The logic the RICS demonstrates when using competencies to assess an applicants suitability for chartered status needs to be extended to the 'doorway' of the profession i.e. entry to accredited degrees. This would ensure that the 'brightest and best' and more importantly 'capable and comitted' individuals are not excluded by the current failing tariff system. The RICS stated that the new relationship was a true partnership, at present, from the HE perspective, the partnership is not achieving its stated objectives and is actively damaging the remains of construction education in the UK. A true partnership would be one where the RICS trusted the admission tutors and course leaders to continue to provide, and expand, the number of graduates the industry and profession so desperately needs.

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