The future of Quantity Surveying.
As a recruitment consultant working specifically in the area of construction, I speak to owners and managers of construction companies on a daily basis.
Through my time working in this sector, I have gained a thorough understanding of the issues facing such businesses when it comes to attracting and retaining talent in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and across the UK.
Much of the focus tends to centre on employment practices and international lure, however, one area which I had not looked at in the past was academic discourse, and how this impacted upon sectoral careers.
I recently visited Ulster University’s Jordanstown campus to meet Mark McKane, the Course Director of their BSc (Hons) Quantity Surveying and Commercial Management degree programme. I wanted to get his take on the future of Quantity Surveying, from both an academic perspective and employment perspective. He knows the future Quantity Surveyors that Ulster University will produce over the next four years, and also has a great insight into the sector, having worked within it himself.

The good news for the Construction industry is that the recruitment numbers to the Quantity Surveying course at Ulster University has recovered to healthier levels.

Mark explained:
“Demand for the Quantity Surveying Degree at Ulster University has shown strong growth over the last five years, peaking last year at 390 applications, but even with the higher entry threshold for this year’s intake (AAB profile) we’re still seeing application numbers in excess of 300.”
“Unlike other regions of the UK and Republic of Ireland our programme is still dominantly full-time, however we’ve seen a steady growth in part-time student applications over the same period.”

But does this mean that Graduate Quantity Surveyors will be easier to recruit over the next few years?

Mark suggests that we’re not out of the woods yet as demand appears to be growing more quickly than supply, which is supported by numerous industry analysts expressing concern at the growing skills gap in the sector. It will depend on the way that companies recruit and the practices they employ proactively. If they want to recruit the next generation of talent then they’ll have to take a close look at their recruitment and retention processes which have substantially changed from the way they were recruiting 15-20 years ago.
 Millennials (referring to those born between 1980 and 2000) have grown up in the digital revolution and via the use of connected devices, such as smartphones, are always ‘switched on’. In order to attract and retain, there needs to be a transformation to allow for a more flexible approach as well as meeting the requirements of a digitally transforming society.

Furthermore, Millennials, and in particular Generation Y, have a number of new expectations in terms of their careers and lifestyles. This includes purpose and fulfilment beyond salary and professional status. The days of putting an advert/job description in a newspaper and receiving hundreds of relevant applicants are over. Companies need to ask themselves; “why should they work for us rather than our competitor?” or “what do we do differently or better than our competitors?”.

These questions can be difficult to answer definitively but they need to be given attention in order for companies to attract and retain the most suitable talent.

Two of Ulster University’s Quantity Surveying students, currently on their placement years, highlighted what they will be looking for in their first graduate role.

Student One;
“Reputation of the company, money, progression opportunities and companies that have invested in new technology are all important factors. ”
“What will the company do for the graduate?“.

Student Two:
“My plan is to progress in a company that is reaching out to a wider market and taking on work from both public and private sectors. I have an interest in BIM so I would be keen to see how Quantity Surveyors working in both the public and private sectors adapt once the mandates for BIM maturity levels kick in. I will also be hoping to work towards my APC, so a company with an in-house programme would be of preference. Finally, I suppose progression would be my pick of the list. With progression comes salary, so with hard work and experience maybe I’ll call the shots someday.”

Today’s graduates are ambitious, up-to-date with the latest software innovations and are not just looking for a job, they are looking for a career where they will be developed into future business leaders. They want to know what progression will look like and how it will be achieved. They want to work on challenging projects but also want to know that they have the support in place early on in their career.

Over recent years, with more Northern Ireland businesses focusing on winning work in Great Britain, we’ve seen more of Northern Ireland’s Quantity Surveying Graduates move from locally based companies to companies based in Great Britain who have in turn, noticed the strength of the Northern Irish construction professional and are now actively recruiting them. Consequently, not only are Northern Ireland companies competing with other local companies for the strongest graduates, they are now more than ever competing with Great Britain and Republic of Ireland based companies to attract and retain local talent.

There is also the draw of the huge projects on the continent and further afield. Quantity Surveying Graduates can earn €40,000 plus living expenses if they decide to move to work on one of the big Data Centre projects in the Nordic countries. They can earn around €35,000 - €40,000 if they decide to start their career in Dublin. If graduates want to work in Northern Ireland, they can expect a starting salary of £22,500 - £30,000.

One of the things that Mark said to me is that the majority of future Quantity Surveyors studying at Ulster University have secured jobs pre-graduation, most of these follow on from their QS placement, so it is important to plan long-term to have any chance of attracting the best talent.

He explained: “Employers see the value of Ulster University’s students during placement and try to reduce the risk of losing them during final year by offering to sponsor their final year fees or offer to employ them full time if they would consider transferring to the part-time mode of the programme and complete their degree over two years rather than one. “

So, how can you attract the best students before they have secured a placement position?
Sponsoring a module on the programme is one way of establishing the contact and showcasing the opportunities. A variety of employers have already recognised the need to attract talent as early as possible on their journey in their profession.

Over the last six years the Degree Programme has attracted a number of industrial partners, offering to provide resources to refresh the assessment opportunities and enable the students to simulate real life project problem solving tasks. In return, the sponsor can showcase their brand within the resources, by bringing along popups, taking a seat at the module presentation assessments to experience the talent of the cohort and marketing opportunities. Different sponsors will connect with different year groups, modules or module combinations that might reflect the core of their particular USP and the career opportunities on offer. The point is, that by getting involved we create the opportunity to better match supply to demand in the most rewarding and engaging ways; with the industry partner adding value to the student learning experience whilst highlighting their brand and career paths.

Other approaches might include a summer internship at the end of first year, a company scholarship or sponsored degree. Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs) are another way that construction companies can develop collaborative partnerships with universities and secure the skills of high calibre graduates.

“A KTP is a three-way partnership between a business, a university, and a high-calibre graduate known as an associate, that offers a company a chance to collaborate on a business opportunity, idea or innovation to help the business gain the knowledge and capability it needs.”

Source: https://www.ulster.ac.uk/business/work-with-us/funding/knowledge-transfer-partnerships

These programmes are partly funded by Invest Northern Ireland and provide the company with access to the expertise of Ulster University’s staff in the area of innovation and access to the highest calibre ‘associate’ to manage the implementation of the project, who is also attracted by the training budgets included within the funding allowance. Most projects last for 24 – 36 months after which time the industry partner usually recruits the ‘associate’ on a permanent basis.

Mark had a message to construction employers that the skills gap is demonstrable.

“More and more employers are making contact with us each year as their businesses grow, but few are investing in measures to attract the best talent in our primary and secondary schools into selecting built environment vocations as a career of choice. “

Last year, Mark alongside his colleague David Comiskey launched BelMCraft (Built Environment Information Modelling Craft); a game they developed to help young people better understand the built environment. Aimed at primary pupils; the platform based on the Minecraft Game, highlights the emerging use of technology in the construction sector. The player has to consider real life challenges including planning issues, health and safety risks, structural aspects and cost in their virtual 3d project build.

In June 2017, BelMCraft was rolled out across schools in Scotland following sponsorship from leading UK construction company, Morgan Sindall. Further interest in sponsorship of the programme has been expressed by a leading construction firm in Paris and also by HS2 Ltd. who are working on the high speed railway linking London, Birmingham, the East Midlands, Leeds and Manchester. As yet, the programme awaits sponsorship to be delivered across Northern Ireland schools; the pool from which local companies will be recruiting from in the future.

In conclusion, Mark added: “With a widening demand for our services and a constrained supply of talent, combined with the increasingly recognised benefits of BIM, innovators will find non-traditional solutions that provide a better service to their clients, delivering more with less. All the ingredients are ready, so there is no escaping it; the way we do business in the construction industry is going to be transformed by client demand and digitisation, which will have far-reaching implications. So innovate before it’s too late!!”

On Friday 15 June 2018, the BSc (Hons) Quantity Surveying and Commercial Management programme at Ulster University will be hosting their annual stakeholder and awards event. The event, which commences at 11am in the Jordanstown Campus, will be an excellent opportunity for companies to look into how they can go about recruiting QS Graduates; as well as looking at the skills that are established through study of the programme. Anyone interested in attending should contact Amanda Thompson at Ulster University on a.thompson@ulster.ac.uk or telephone (028) 9036 6808.

Micheal Hewitt, CPL
A current student studying on the BSc (Hons) Quantity Surveying and Commercial Management Degree Programme at Ulster University who is currently completing his placement year

What are you looking for from a career in Quantity Surveying?
Above all else I am looking for financial stability and job security. Everyone can talk about wanting a vocation or job where they can make a difference, but the general financial situation in recent years has put a larger focus on job security certainly for me and I believe a career in quantity surveying will be able to afford me this.

What would attract you to a certain firm over another?
Online reviews (websites such as Glassdoor), social media presence, EHS, career progression and salary (not in that order).

Does engagement with the QS Programme at an early stage appeal to you?
It has the potential to but I don’t think it was presented to us particularly effectively, if at all. If companies want to recruit university students it should be less about free pens and other novelties and more about speaking to students as adults, like you would to job applicants, and getting them out to your company and showing them what you do. Tell us about your thoughts on Placement, is this a good way for employers to recruit staff and what did you look for in your placement provider?
If a job advertisement featured a line such as “At the end of this placement, there is potential for the student to go on to joining our graduate scheme.” This would place it above the others that don’t, in my opinion. Companies that have graduate schemes show that they are thinking about their futures. They have plans to grow; giving the impression that they have a positive outlook.

A current final year student studying on the BSc (Hons) Quantity Surveying and Commercial Management Degree Programme at Ulster University

What are you looking for from a career in Quantity Surveying?
I am looking for a rewarding career that has lots of networks and involvement with the industry. Also, I love to travel so that’s rewarding for me too.

What would attract you to a certain firm over another?
Money would be the main concern, however also being happy and content at work is also important and the team of people that you work with is crucial for project success and how successful you are at work.

Does engagement with the QS Programme at an early stage appeal to you?
Yes they are very appealing and should be encouraged more in QS programmes. It’s rewarding for the hard work that you put in.

Tell us about your thoughts on Placement, is this a good way for employers to recruit staff and what did you look for in your placement provider?
Placement is very good. I had an excellent placement in MAR, it gives you a good sense of how the workplace operates; how teams are involved and it gives the employer an indication of you; if you are a good worker and if they would like to keep you on. I found placement extremely beneficial and have ended up securing a full-time position.
I was offered to complete my final year part-time, but refused the offer as I wanted to get it completed and out of the way, as with it being the final year I needed to focus everything in this year.