

Rethinking Recognition: Building a Profession That Reflects Its Practitioners



This article challenges the longstanding assumption that academic qualification is the primary marker of competence in the surveying profession. It argues that RICS' current chartership pathways, while presented as inclusive and flexible, in practice exclude a significant number of capable professionals, particularly those from vocational or non-academic backgrounds.

Drawing on both historical context and the findings of RICS' 2024 Entry and Assessment Review, the article highlights the structural barriers created by the profession's increasing reliance on RICS-accredited degrees. It explores the lived impact of this gatekeeping: stalled careers, lost talent, reinforced social inequality, and growing disillusionment within the profession.

With RICS now committed to reform through the creation of the Entry and Assessment Implementation & Oversight Group (EAI OG), the article makes the case for a model of chartership grounded in competence, not credentials. It calls for formally recognised vocational pathways, clear experience-based routes to MRICS, and a renewed focus on practical capability as the true foundation of professional recognition.

INTRODUCTION – THE HIDDEN DIVIDE

In the surveying profession, becoming chartered is widely regarded as the gold standard. The letters MRICS carry weight: they imply credibility, competence, and professional authority. For many, they open doors to career progression, recognition, and influence. But behind this badge of prestige lies a structural problem that has, for too long, been quietly ignored.

While RICS promotes the idea that its chartered status is a reflection of professional competence, earned through experience, judgement, and ethical practice; the reality is that the path to MRICS has remained tightly controlled by academic qualification. In practice, it is not your ability to survey, value, or manage projects that determines your eligibility; it is where, how, and even if you studied.

This creates a hidden divide in the profession: between those who followed the traditional academic route, GCSEs, A Levels, a RICS-accredited degree, and those who didn't. The latter group, no matter how experienced or capable, often find themselves stuck, permanently excluded from full chartership. It is a divide that has nothing to do with professionalism or skill, and everything to do with educational background.

In 2024, RICS publicly acknowledged this disconnect in its Entry and Assessment Review, stating that the current system is not inclusive, not flexible, and not fit for the modern profession. It has since begun the process of reform through a newly formed Entry and Assessment Implementation & Oversight Group (EAI OG). But the challenge remains: will the reforms truly shift the focus from qualification to competence?

So, we must ask: if chartership is meant to represent professional excellence, why has it been fundamentally tied to a university degree? And what will it take to build a profession where access is shaped by what you can do, not just where you studied?

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

It wasn't always this way. For much of the 20th century, becoming a chartered surveyor did not require a university degree. Many of the profession's most respected figures, some now FRICS, entered via more vocational or practice-based routes. Polytechnics, professional exams, and qualifications such as the Diploma, Higher National Certificate (HNC), and Higher National Diploma (HND) were widely recognised and respected. These routes provided structured, rigorous training, focused on skill, not status, and enabled those with technical ability and ambition to rise through the ranks without needing academic pedigree.

Apprenticeships and on-the-job learning were the norm. A young person could join a local practice straight from school, study part-time at a local college, and work their way up through experience, mentorship, and professional assessment. The system recognised and rewarded practical competence. It opened the profession to a far broader demographic than today, creating space for individuals from varied educational, social, and economic backgrounds.



But over time, RICS moved to align itself more closely with the university system. What began as a professional body rooted in trade and craft evolved into one increasingly focused on academic validation. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, the profession had become almost fully degree-dependent. Today, unless you hold a RICS-accredited degree, or pay to complete one as a conversion course, your options for achieving MRICS status are limited, opaque, and often prohibitively expensive.

This shift has created a deep irony: many of the senior chartered surveyors who now mentor APC candidates or sit on RICS assessment panels would not meet the entry criteria today. Their own routes, through part-time study, technical diplomas, and real-world experience, are now largely defunct. In its effort to modernise, the profession narrowed its own pipeline and, in doing so, excluded the very kinds of entrants who once built its foundations.

Now, with RICS committing to the implementation of a new qualifications framework via the Entry and Assessment Implementation & Oversight Group, there is at last formal recognition that this history matters. But the challenge ahead is clear: not just to reform, but to recover the strengths of the past, and apply them to the needs of a modern, inclusive profession.

THE MODERN RICS PATHWAY: STRUCTURE AND BARRIER

RICS presents a range of entry routes into chartered status, each framed around competence, ethics, and professional development. On paper, these pathways appear inclusive, designed to suit candidates from different backgrounds and at varying stages of their career. But in practice, the gateway to MRICS remains heavily guarded by academic qualification, with a RICS-accredited degree still functioning as the near-universal key.

The most prominent and promoted route is the Graduate Pathway to APC. This assumes a traditional academic trajectory: GCSEs, A Levels, a RICS-accredited undergraduate or postgraduate degree, followed by a structured two-year period of practical training and a final assessment. It is designed for, and only truly accessible to, the university graduate. If you've followed that system from the outset, the route works. If not, you're expected to go back and fit yourself into it.

Beyond this, there is AssocRICS, often positioned as an accessible alternative route. While it offers formal recognition to experienced professionals, including those without a degree, it is widely regarded as a second-tier status. Crucially, there remains no reliable or direct route from AssocRICS to MRICS for those without academic qualifications. For many capable professionals, this is where their career progression stalls.

The Senior Professional and Specialist routes, designed for experienced candidates without conventional academic credentials, offer little more hope. These pathways are poorly promoted, difficult to navigate, and place a heavy burden on applicants to demonstrate competence in academic-style submissions, often without adequate support. As the 2024 Entry and Assessment Review bluntly admitted, these routes are "confusing, rarely used, and lack consistency or transparency."



Even those who do hold a university degree, but in an unrelated subject, are typically required to complete a RICS-accredited conversion course to be eligible for the APC. These programmes are self-funded, often cost thousands of pounds, and are pursued years into a career, simply to validate skills already being demonstrated in the field. And for those without any degree at all, the route to MRICS is almost completely closed.

In this way, the current structure prioritises academic form over professional substance. It disadvantages late entrants, people who pivot into surveying from industries like construction, project management, or estate agency, only to find themselves trapped by the very system they're already succeeding within. It overlooks vocationally trained professionals with rich practical knowledge and years of leadership experience. It excludes those who didn't follow the GCSE-A Level-degree pipeline, regardless of how far they've come or what they've achieved.

RICS now acknowledges this reality. The recent Review calls for "inclusive eligibility routes" and "a single, clear point of entry" that recognises prior learning and lived experience. But this reform is not yet delivered. For now, the message remains: unless your learning was formal, full-time, and university-based, it doesn't count the same.

In a profession that claims to value competence, judgement, and lifelong development, that message isn't just outdated; it's fundamentally at odds with how real professionals build careers.



THE COMPETENCE ARGUMENT

If chartered status is meant to signal professional excellence, then we need to ask: what do we actually mean by competence? According to RICS' own framework, competence is the ability to apply knowledge, exercise sound judgement, behave ethically, and deliver high standards in professional practice. These are not academic traits, they are professional ones. They are earned, not taught. Demonstrated, not declared.

Competence reveals itself in the field, not in the lecture hall. It looks like a surveyor who resolves complex disputes between clients and contractors. A team leader who steers junior staff through challenging site conditions. A trusted professional overseeing multi-million-pound projects not because of a framed certificate on the wall, but because of a track record of getting it right. These are the people clients call back, the people colleagues rely on, the people who hold the profession's reputation in practice, not just in principle.

And yet, within the RICS system as it stands, competence is secondary to qualification.

There are AssocRICS surveyors, undeniably skilled and highly experienced, who lead teams, manage major portfolios, and even mentor APC candidates on their way to MRICS. In every practical sense, they are chartered. But without the academic credentials to satisfy the entry requirements, they remain excluded. Some are told to return to university to complete a conversion degree, costing thousands of pounds and years of study, just to "prove" what they are already doing, day in and day out.

Worse still, many professionals without any designation, some with decades of service, unbroken ethical records, and strong client reputations, outperform chartered colleagues in delivery, commercial awareness, and leadership. They train others, manage risk, and uphold the standards the profession depends on. They are, in the truest sense of the word, surveyors. But the system sees them as unqualified, simply because they haven't followed the academic script.

This disconnect is not just unfair, it's unsustainable. If RICS claims its standards are rooted in professionalism and public trust, it must reckon with a system where a theoretical grasp of ethics is prioritised over years of ethical conduct, and where an accredited course is taken as better proof of ability than a career spent delivering complex work.

The 2024 Entry and Assessment Review has acknowledged this very problem, committing to a new assessment model that is "progressive," "modular," and grounded in "appropriate recognition for experience and prior learning." These are encouraging words. But words alone are not enough.

If competence is the true standard, and it must be, then it must be recognised wherever it's found, not just in those who fit the conventional academic mould.

THE FALSE PROMISE OF "INCLUSIVE ROUTES"

RICS often promotes its pathways to chartership as accessible, flexible, and inclusive, designed to reflect the diversity of modern practice. On paper, there are multiple ways in: the graduate route, AssocRICS, the Senior Professional route, and the Specialist pathway. The message is clear: whatever your background, there's a route for you.

But for those who have actually attempted these so-called alternative pathways, the reality is very different.

The non-cognate graduate route, intended for those with unrelated degrees, still typically requires candidates to complete a RICS-accredited conversion course before they can even begin the APC. These courses are expensive, time-consuming, and usually self-funded. They are, in effect, a toll gate: a cost paid not to prove capability, but to satisfy eligibility.

The Senior Professional Route, meanwhile, is marketed as a way for experienced practitioners to become chartered without returning to formal education. In theory, it offers an alternative for those with years of relevant practice. In reality, as RICS acknowledged in its 2024 Entry and Assessment Review, this route is confusing, inconsistently applied, and underused. The process is opaque, the support is minimal, and the requirements often mirror academic submissions more suited to someone trained in higher education than to a practitioner grounded in real-world delivery.

And even when candidates do make it through, the question remains: to what end? By the time someone has accumulated enough experience to be eligible, they've usually already built a successful career without the letters after their name. They've led teams, secured major projects, and earned trust through performance. For them, MRICS status often comes too late to make a meaningful difference. It becomes symbolic; a box ticked long after the race has been run. Ironically, the system opens its gates only after the prize has lost its value.

Even AssocRICS, which is supposed to provide professional recognition for those without a degree, offers no reliable route to MRICS without further academic qualifications. As noted in the Review:

"Many AssocRICS without a degree are completely stuck... They need a suitable AssocRICS-MRICS progression route – promised for years but no details ever released."

For these professionals, AssocRICS becomes a professional cul-de-sac. It may look inclusive on the surface, but in practice, it functions as a boundary rather than a bridge.

What RICS presents as a broad and welcoming set of routes is, in reality, a narrow academic funnel. Unless you've entered through the traditional graduate route, or are willing and able to re-enter formal education, the alternatives are tokenistic at best, exclusionary at worst.

If inclusivity is to mean anything, it must go beyond the appearance of choice. It must acknowledge and value non-academic pathways not only as entry points, but as valid, respected routes to the highest levels of professional recognition. That means building clear, supported routes from AssocRICS to MRICS, embracing modular assessment, and formally recognising competence wherever it's developed not just where it's certified.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF ACADEMIC GATEKEEPING

If RICS is serious about building a truly inclusive, future-facing profession, it must confront the gatekeeping role of academic qualification and begin to rebalance the pathway to chartership around competence, not credentials.

Historically, the profession embraced a far more practical and accessible model. Many of today's senior chartered surveyors came through polytechnics and professional exams; routes that blended on-the-job experience with part-time study and a strong emphasis on technical skill. These pathways were structured, rigorous, and respected. They didn't demand academic pedigree; they rewarded ability. And they worked.

In today's landscape, where surveying roles are increasingly specialised, and entry routes more varied, it makes even more sense to support structured, vocational alternatives. Diploma-level qualifications such as those developed by SAVA, and new (and developing) initiatives from providers like Coppergate Training, demonstrate that high-quality, practically focused education is not only viable, it's essential.

These programmes are built for working professionals. They offer the technical foundations, ethical grounding, and competence-based training that RICS says it values without requiring a return to university. With formal recognition, they could provide a clear, credible route to MRICS, one that rewards performance, not privilege.

What's needed now is for RICS to formally recognise these qualifications as legitimate pathways not only to AssocRICS, but to full chartered status. That recognition should sit alongside a true, transparent experience-based route for professionals who have already demonstrated their capability in practice. Competence should be assessed where it's earned: on the job, not simulated in a classroom years after the fact.

This does not mean lowering standards. Quite the opposite. It means broadening the pool of recognised talent, ensuring the profession reflects the real world it serves. It means creating a system where MRICS signifies excellence regardless of background, not just the ability to afford a degree.

Crucially, this direction is now supported by RICS itself. The 2024 Entry and Assessment Review calls for a "progressive, modular" assessment model, with routes that reflect "modern working lives" and give due credit to prior learning and vocational achievement. The newly formed Entry and Assessment Implementation & Oversight Group (EAI OG) is tasked with delivering that change. The opportunity is real, but it must not lose momentum.

Reform isn't just possible, it's necessary. Without it, the profession will continue to alienate exactly the kinds of people it needs: experienced, capable, committed professionals who didn't happen to take the academic route.



CONCLUSION – RECLAIMING PROFESSIONALISM

At its core, surveying is a profession grounded in skill, experience, and judgement. It is built on trust; the trust of clients, the public, and the built environment sector. That trust is not earned by degree certificates, but by the consistent delivery of competent, ethical, professional work.

And yet, RICS has long tied its highest level of recognition, MRICS status, not to what professionals do, but to what they've studied. The message is clear: academic history still matters more than lived professional capability. That approach doesn't just fail individuals, it weakens the profession itself.

It excludes those who didn't follow the academic path, even when they have spent years demonstrating the very qualities RICS claims to uphold. It disadvantages vocational professionals, those who came up through apprenticeships, site experience, and hands-on delivery; often training, leading, and outperforming their chartered colleagues. It tells them they are not "qualified enough," no matter how far their work has taken them.

This model no longer serves a modern, specialised profession. Nor does it reflect the range of structured diplomas, practical qualifications, and modular assessment models that now exist. It is time for RICS to stop defending the appearance of inclusivity and deliver on its promise.

That means more than updating brochures or rebranding old routes. It means rebuilding the system so that MRICS genuinely reflects competence, not credentials. It means formally recognising new vocational qualifications. It means creating clear, supported, experience-led routes to chartership. And it means placing practical expertise on equal footing with academic background.

To its credit, RICS has now acknowledged the need for change. The 2024 Entry and Assessment Review lays out a progressive, modular vision of assessment that reflects "modern working lives." The newly formed EAIOG has a mandate to turn that vision into reality.

But the profession will judge this reform not by its language, but by its outcomes.

Reclaiming professionalism starts with recognising that excellence in surveying is defined by capability, not academic status. It's demonstrated through judgement, accountability, and consistent delivery, not through the route someone took to enter the profession.

If surveying is truly about what you can do, not where you studied, then it's time for the path to recognition to reflect that.

RICS must modernise. Not by changing its message, but by changing its model.

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