

Most if not all of this summer's building graduates are sure of getting a job. This optimistic, but nevertheless realistic, prediction is based mainly on the performance of last year's graduates, information from the colleges themselves and the intentions of the contractors.

Last year's building graduates, with very few exceptions, succeeded in obtaining employment within the industry. And this at a time when graduate unemployment is higher than ever and more than 10 000 of last year's graduates are still looking for jobs, according to the three main organisations involved in gauging graduate supply and demand (the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services, Standing Conference of Employers of Graduates, and the Central Services Unit for Careers and Appointments Services).

There are 17 building degree courses available. Heads of department are unanimous in their optimism and say that they are confident that their students will once again be successful in finding employment after graduation. Professor Sydney Urry of Brunel University has said that "building graduates are highly employable and can look forward to rewarding careers - in every sense". The professors agree that there is no real reason why these graduates should join the three million unemployed. It is, however, apparent that there is no longer the wide and exciting variety of jobs to choose from as used to be the case.

Many students will no longer be involved with large contracts and will have to settle for renovation and repair work, or may be forced to cast their nets further and gain employment within Government departments, local authorities, insurance companies and materials producers. This lack of choice, which is due to the slump in workloads within the industry, has affected the sandwich student quite heavily. Many have had to look long and hard for industrial training places. At Lanchester Polytechnic two students were unable to obtain industrial training at the appropriate stage and were forced to take it at the end of their degree course.

The recession calls for flexibility on the part of the graduate, and that is something that the broad-based building degree will certainly provide. Compared to a structural/civil engineer or an architect, a building graduate is more able to adapt because he is at home in a variety of situations with his knowledge of computer programs, cost value analysis, communication and control techniques, site practice and production management. And there is always work abroad.

There is, however, a cloud on the university horizon in the shape of the University Grants Committee. The UGC has cut back on university funding overall. There has been an 11-15 per cent decrease in general funding, and 5 per cent reduction in student levels. Fortunately the main theme of the cuts has

been to maintain engineering technology and science subjects, which means that building departments should emerge relatively unscathed.

It is not easy to gauge the exact consequences of these cuts, since individual universities will make the final decisions on the future of their departments. It may mean early staff retirements, perhaps staff redundancies, worsened staff-student ratios and reduced spending on equipment. The effects will vary from university to university. One extreme case is the University of Manchester's Institute of Science and Technology, which has experienced cuts averaging 24 per cent - but this has been heavily influenced by the reductions in foreign students.

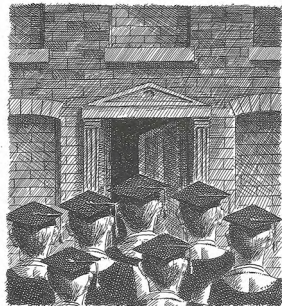
Most concern is caused by the way the UGC has recommended

the cuts, without specifying where or how extensive they should be. This has provided the universities with a *carte blanche* so that no department can feel safe. But in most cases there appears to be no justification in reducing courses in building when only a handful exist in the whole country compared to 52 in civil engineering and 35 in architecture, and in total there are no more than 600 building graduates per year, including around 200 from polytechnics.

The polytechnics have only just received the details of the distribution of next year's funds. Polytechnics are to lose 5 per cent of their income over three years, while colleges will suffer a 9 per cent cut. Although the two sets of institutions are assessed on a different basis, authorities are free to allocate money as they choose where both types are under their control. Under the new system some polytechnics may escape fresh cuts almost entirely.

The attitude of a dozen major contractors interviewed is one of "investing in a brighter future". When questioned, most major contractors were able to say that the number of graduate recruits has remained stable, although some, like the group training manager for Mowlem, did admit that the policy is a bit hazardous considering the uncertain economic future. And there are those like Tarmac and Bovis which have not yet come to a decision but claim not to be recruiting due to low workload. But contractors believe that there are firm grounds for hoping for a recovery now that the economy appears to have reached bottom. Most of the companies are taking the view that there is always a need for good managers and that to prune in that area is a false economy, since if there is to be a recovery there will be an overwhelming need for them.

Looking ahead, it is possible to say that the building graduate will still be very much in demand in years to come. And many are of the opinion of Bill Waterworth, secretary of the Committee of Building Degree Heads of Department, that when the upturn does arrive, the 600 or so available graduates "will not satisfy the demands of a normal climate".



THE DEGREE OF SUCCESS

Despite the recession which besets the building industry, it appears that building degree students have an almost guaranteed future after they graduate.

Grace Pieniazek reports.