

The Royal Society of Ulster Architects

Response to ‘Modernising the initial education and training of architects Discussion document’ from ARB

Introduction

The Royal Society of Ulster Architects (RSUA) welcomes the opportunity to engage with the ARB on this review setting out a vision for the future of architects’ education. RSUA set out its initial thoughts on reforming education in its response to the Department for Levelling Up consultation on architects’ regulation outlining that it should be accessible, reflective of modern-day practices and diverse.

RSUA’s response to the ARB call for evidence of architects’ competency included a comprehensive outline of what the organisation believes should be key competencies for architects.

Competencies need to be in place to ensure that architects can work in an ethical and responsible manner. Knowledge and understanding of sustainable design, ensuring inclusion and social equity in design decisions are all essential criteria for architects.

RSUA believes strongly that architects must be holistically trained to a standard baseline in order to become registered.

It is critical that any proposals for reform of the education framework for the profession secure the need for every student to reach that baseline, and for specialisms and areas of particular expertise being above that baseline.

Chapter 4 of the discussion paper sets out the evidence we have analysed to date, and the conclusions we’ve reached. Is there anything you believe is missing from these conclusions, that we should also take into account as we start developing the outcomes-based approach?

Views on the proposals

RSUA agree with the conclusions reached by ARB from the evidence it has collated and in particular with 4.11 suggesting that ‘the quality of experience of students in higher education varied greatly’.

RSUA suggestions on strengthening the proposals

In seeking to bolster the proposals within the discussion document, it may be helpful to analyse the Education theme within the RIBA’s publication High Road to 2034

<https://www.architecture.com/-/media/C462A79430304FC5B36E2DD61A0F28BF.pdf?la=en>

Institutions

The RSUA believes that the quality of architecture being taught in higher level education is being eroded as institutions in higher level education prioritise numbers of students, challenging required physical and human resources and a focus on international recruitment.

The RSUA has noted that in some cases, students are being widely taught by individuals that have not practiced as architects and instead are PhD qualified, often in the area of social / humanities, and focussed on research rather than education and preparing students for practice and the associated technical demands. The organisation notes however that it can be advantageous for students to receive specialist teaching from other construction professionals in relevant areas.

In some circumstances, this also features in staff recruitment processes and promotion within institutions where these are primarily based on research performance or revenue generated.

A broad balance connection between theory/academic and practice/industry is essential to meet the ARB's criteria for prescription. This is essential to prepare the future architect for making a positive impact to society.

The RSUA is aware of some instances where the support from Universities given to its staff who are qualified, registered, chartered and experienced practitioners is not forthcoming in terms of contributing to professional registration fees or continuing professional development - which makes delivering a competent, knowledgeable, ethical contemporary profession aimed at delivering for society a challenge.

Specialisation

RSUA believes that specialisation is in the interests of schools of architecture (due to their focus on research) and of large practices, (due to their concentration of teams on separate sections of the design and construction process) - but it is not necessarily in the interest of the public nor the profession, individual architects, public safety, sustainability and achieving and realising long-term performance and value.

The majority of architects work in relatively small practices where architects generally follow projects from the outset to occupation which makes the possibility of achieving the Dame J Hackett's "golden thread" of idea, design, construction and performance much more likely.

ARB need to ensure architects are able to maintain an initial, holistic threshold of professional competency. This is to ensure that when architects are following a project from inception to occupation or focusing on ideas and strategy, technical development, or production/delivery, there will be a knowledge and understanding of the stages before and after a particular point in a project's timeline.

Equally if in due course architects specialise in a particular area of part of the plan of work or the technical delivery, they have an understanding of the implications of their specialist area, the processes before and after their involvement.

RSUA urge caution at the inference at 4.6 of specialisation within the University/pre-registration stage of becoming an architect. The RSUA has been consistent in outlining that specialisation cannot be to the detriment of threshold core knowledge, skill and behaviours.

Short elective modules were previously offered at higher level education in addition to core modules (e.g., landscape, lighting, timber) as a potential basis for specialisation but these have since been removed from most third level undergraduate (Part 1) and postgraduate (Part 2) courses.

RSUA believes it would be an appropriate measure for architects' education if this model was reinvigorated to emphasise the need for core / threshold, with any specialisms in addition to that threshold, not instead of.

Specialism before registration would be the equivalent to suggesting students studying medicine could omit hands or the nervous system, and become particularly expert in skin, for example – and then enter general practice.

Direct entry

The discussion document refers to the possibility of direct entry into year four at 4.16 and RSUA would urge extreme caution.

With a well-defined understanding of the core knowledge skills and behaviours necessary to enter the UK register, suggesting that that can be achieved within two years of postgraduate study plus some professional practice experience undermines the profession and raises questions regarding the need for the primary three years of education, which from our experience are essential as the 'bedrock' primary knowledge skills and behaviours – addressing commonly held key principles, terminology, ethics and professional matters.

To suggest a student could enter at year four of a five-year academic process goes against the direction of travel of architects having to be much more expert, knowledgeable and skilled to deliver for the public, and keep them safe and well.

It is noted that currently, direct entry cannot be after the halfway point of any university course – both undergraduate and postgraduate and that would be with a very careful mapping of acquired prior learning – so as to ensure the requirements of ARB are being achieved by each individual.

The RSUA believe the risks to the public, of allowing entry into year four would be much greater than any benefit.

Chapter 5 of the discussion paper sets out the vision for our new regulatory approach. To what extent do you agree with our vision? Please feel free to explain your view, and make any suggestions as to what is missing.

Views on the proposals

RSUA welcomes that the initial regulatory statements are brief, though these will need to be elaborated upon by ARB in conjunction with registered practitioners to ensure they reflect a robust framework.

RSUA suggestions on strengthening the proposals

In relation to ensuring accessibility to the profession, RSUA believes that there are already numerous avenues of entry at Part 1 and 2 which are relatively unknown, and hence should be communicated much more widely, both by the ARB and institutions to ensure potential students have all the information possible when considering routes into the profession.

To enable institutions to innovate and to promote diversity, we think that the structure needs to change from the current approach of Parts 1, 2 and 3. What are your views on this?

View on the proposals

The organisation recommends that the ARB more clearly articulate their understanding of diversity.

The current parts 1, 2 and 3 structure has its advantages in being staged as it allows for levels of achievement and reflection that allow graduates to potentially go sideways into related professions, and also to change course provider.

RSUA would estimate that almost half of part one student change provider for part two. That flexibility allows for mobility of undergraduate students gaining ambition and confidence to relocate, increase experience and be exposed to different staff and peers.

RSUA welcomes any moves to promote diversity within the profession at any early stage, however it may well be simpler to ensure that there is equality of opportunity. All academic institutions should be able to demonstrate equal opportunities however the RSUA would be concerned if any attempts at encouraging equal opportunities could lead to a reduction in high standards.

RSUA notes the RIBA Social Mobility Action Plan (2018-19) which identified a series of hurdles to opportunity and three actions for each hurdle – to help break down barriers and increase access to the profession.

We believe that the best way to describe the competencies architects need may be to describe what an architect must know, what they must be able to do, and how they must behave. To what extent do you agree?

RSUA view on the proposals

RSUA has been an advocate for outcomes-based education for some time, as have other partners. The move to competence-based education will be positive for the profession and those in education – with both staff and students in universities very much used to an “outcomes” based approach.

The organisation would encourage ARB to clearly outline what will be the core competencies for any holistic education programme/stage (e.g. Part 1, 2 and 3) and how they are to be demonstrated.

The RSUA is clear however, that a baseline of education must be maintained to ensure architects are sufficiently competent across all the key competencies prior to registration.

Are there any other views you would like to share with us about this work?

RSUA notes the welcome inclusion in the discussion document of the difficulty in securing placement for relevant students. Closer relationships between academia and practice must be advantageous for the education of future architects – but the availability of placement employment, sandwich years et cetera varies with the business fortunes of practice, economic cycles etc.

RSUA would welcome research into how larger practices which are able to withstand economic ebb and flow could take on a 'teaching hospital' type role to ensure that students and graduates within their organisations are getting a varied, broad experience across all stages of the plan of work. Whilst the teaching hospital type approach is to be encouraged this would be in addition to the broader experience mechanisms across the wider profession.