

Internal
management

Access for all

Let's unbind our old school ties

Curriculum uniformity within architectural education is becoming unaffordable. But what are the alternatives?

Words: Harriet Harriss

While many practices are swiftly recalibrating their ways of doing things in response to market uncertainty, architectural education seems far less agile. This is despite the recent abolition of maintenance grants in England and Wales, and – following the EU referendum result – a likely deficit of £3.7 billion in lost fees from departing EU students and £1 billion less EU research funding. School strategies seem rigid, while the cost of a degree continues to rise.

Two other factors further inhibit financial fecundity: the sector-wide expansion of university administration teams and the emergent spectre of CEO-sized senior management salaries. While these issues might seem beyond architectural educators to influence, inaction is not an option either.

We were poised to take action 18 months ago: as we sat huddled and heckling in the RIBA's Jarvis auditorium: voting to implement the Bologna Agreement. This EU parity proposal would have reduced the length and cost of architectural education and further increased cross-EU mobility for students, academics and young practitioners alike. But instead of a revolution, a nightmare has unfolded: a (in my view) fraudulently imposed and mutually non-consensual divorce from the EU that has derailed our collective optimism for much needed change – greater international exchange, and our ability to offer more affordable routes to professional qualification.

But why is affordability such an important issue? 'Affordability' is about more than just fees. It's an access metric that articulates both our professional ethics and our commitment to inclusivity. If we make education affordable to just a few, we fail to become a profession that is as richly diverse as the society we seek to serve. What schools of architecture need to do is to work out how to help students stick out their tongues to the funding crisis without the risk of getting it cut off. So what are the options?

The re-distributed classroom

The fledgling London School of Architecture (LSA) is one example. Instead of sweaty campus-situated studios, students are located in the 'real world' of a London-glitterati practice. Fees are £6,000 a year and each student receives an RIBA approved salary to boot. Although the school is in its exploratory phase of validation, it offers a both financially and



pedagogically competitive model. According to director Will Hunter, the students' Part II thesis project is intended to set a career trajectory and contribute towards the LSA's emergence as a think tank – pushing the ambition and value far beyond a mere qualification. Students are taught tools and methodologies, but take personal responsibility for developing the judgement needed to apply them. Perhaps one of the most appealing aspects of the LSA initiative is the absence of institutional overheads. Indeed, LSA's decoupling from the obligations and values of a traditional campus institution in search of the cultural interactions offered by Somerset House has affected learning behaviours, too. As Hunter explained, the terms 'student' and 'faculty' are no longer useful; the LSA spirit is much more collaborative.

Fees versus faculty

However, for those who can afford the extra £3,000+ price hike that an institution-situated practice-embedded programmes of-

fers, then Satwinder Samra is launching an MArch in collaborative practice at Sheffield University: this is an innovative earn-as-you-learn validated Part II programme, where students spend 50% of the programme based in practice, and like the LSA benefit from a working income throughout their qualification period.

Regional pioneers

Interestingly however, both the LSA and Sheffield draw their pedagogic proof of concept from the RIBA's own practice-situated qualification initiative – the Parts I & II Office-Based Exam that's been discreetly administered by Ronnie MacLellan at Oxford Brookes School of Architecture since 2002 – but is in effect a continuation of the RIBA's original RIBA Examination in Architecture founded in 1863. Despite the institutional alignment, fees for this programme are a highly competitive £2,351 and the programme requires students to travel to Oxford only once a term, which may explain

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why around 25% of the students enrolled in this programme have young families and are often hail from remote towns and villages.

The revolving door model

However, for more risk-averse under-graduates seeking to combine an immersive, institution-based undergraduate experience with a strong connection to practice, Reading University's new BSc architecture programme, led by Professor Lorraine Farrelly, aims to do both. In this scenario however, practices are invited into the academy, as opposed to being seen as practice-based classroom providers.

Left AA students get hands-on with building in the 1940s.

Right Students at the new practice-supported LSA: from left Rachel Bow, Stuart Goldsworthy-Trapp, Vanessa Jobb, Milly Salisbury, Timothy Ng, Frazer Haviz, and Maeve Dolan.





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Left The new Reading School of Architecture has started life in this converted building...

... but in 2017 Hawkins\Brown will start refurbishing the listed Brutalist URS Building at Reading University **below** to be its new live-projects architecture school

Instead, the intention is to develop a two-way discussion, educating architects as well as students through the revolving door of shared lectures, workshops and events. This offers a refreshing departure from stale sandwich lunch CPDs, and a greater commitment to supporting professional life-long learning than any other school has so far ventured. To kick-start the programme, which launches in a few weeks, a £2,000 annual bursary scheme gives an added incentive to students from lower income backgrounds, too.

Pedagogic pioneers

But are these efforts enough? While the ethics of affordability have been a perennial problem in architecture, not all 'solutions' are future-situated. For example, the Architectural Association School was founded in 1847 by students Robert Kerr and Charles Gray (18 and 23 years old respectively) who were determined to rebel against an exploitative practice-based tutelage system whereby young hopefuls spent decades trying to qualify through a poorly paid internship route. Their tactic was to establish an auto-didactic, each-one-teach-one model of educative enterprise. While the AA School has since resorted to a more conventional

management structure, the model flourishes elsewhere. For example, in the US based Hacker Houses cohabiting students take societal problems as their brief as part of a fee-free higher education alternative to a lifetime of learning debt. In anti-institutions such as these, knowledge is co-created, not just consumed, and discovering new ways of doing things are more important than imitating old ones.

De-institutionalised alternatives

Whereas Kerr and Gray pedagogically petitioned the 'large premiums' demanded by a practice-based learning environment that

was seen as corrupt, today's pedagogic pioneers are turning their back on academe.

So if the question of affordability – writ universal access – cannot be resolved inside our institutions, practice-situated and de-institutionalised pedagogic models will inevitably flourish. If the overheads of institution-situated education are set to increase, perhaps it's time to re-board Cedric Price's PolyArk bus, and tour England as a means to connect students to sites of architectural impact. Because somewhere between the chisel-wielding tradition of aural apprenticeships and the premium-price academic institutions is a vast bandwidth of pedagogic possibility: one where all kinds of more inclusive, accessible, community-engaged, practice-embedded student-led and affordable models of professional education can be pioneered and prototyped, expanded and exported. One where adventurous risk taking, excitement and chance can play their hands. ●

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The RIBA provides a number of bursaries and scholarships to support students experiencing financial hardship, such as: architecture.com/Part2bursaries

See Jane Duncan's column, page 90.

