
Higher Education White Paper Response

Response of the Royal Institute of British Architects to the Department for Education and Skills

‘The Future of Higher Education’

April 2003

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1. Introduction

The Royal Institute of British Architects represents 24,000 architects in the UK and a further 3,000 overseas. The RIBA has a long-standing involvement in higher education through its work in recognising undergraduate courses in architecture in the UK and abroad, leading to RIBA Chartered membership. Currently the RIBA recognises 89 undergraduate Part 1 and Part 2 courses in 36 UK higher education institutions. Schools of Architecture play a vital role in supporting and developing the profession’s knowledge base and research capability.

2. Summary of Response

2.1 The RIBA welcomes the Government’s acknowledgement that higher education brings great benefits to both individuals and the nation and that our universities are world renowned, but that the sector is under pressure and at risk of decline.

2.2 The profession is concerned that the significant decrease in funding per student since 1989 and consequential worsening of the staff-student ratio has hindered the further development of architectural education in the UK, to the detriment of our international competitiveness and advancement of the architectural profession and architecture. The RIBA therefore welcomes the injection of further resources into higher education through increased support for teaching, research and knowledge transfer. The RIBA seeks an assurance from the Government that the significant cash increase from HEFCE in real terms into higher education for teaching will be sustained over and above resource for special initiatives, up to and after the introduction of the Graduate Contribution Scheme in 2006, in order to arrest this decline.

2.3 The RIBA is also very seriously concerned about the impact of the proposals regarding research and student support. Specifically we are concerned that:

The concentration of research funding and expertise in 5* and ♣ 6* rated departments will seriously effect the profession’s capacity to deliver timely, industry relevant and cross disciplinary research on matters to do with architecture and the built environment.

The increased student debt ♣ (we estimate up to £36,000 for a 5 year architecture course) will undermine recent initiatives to attract groups underrepresented in the profession: women, ethnic minorities and those from low-income backgrounds.

The majority ♣ of architects work in very small consultancy practices (10 or less

architectural staff), and it is thus unrealistic for the Government, (item 7.49), to expect these employers to make a significant financial contribution to reduce graduate debt and to ensure that the profession as a whole is broadly representative of society.

3. Research

3.1 The RIBA welcomes the Government's intention to substantially increase funding in research, to improve the training and salaries of researchers and the establishment of the Arts and Humanities Research Council. However, the Institute does not support the proposal to focus research funding on larger, more concentrated research units within fewer institutions. The proposals will seriously diminish the capacity of schools of architecture to undertake industry relevant, timely research to the benefit of the profession and construction industry. No school of architecture received a 5* in the last Research Assessment Exercise (the RIBA has requested that HEFCE review the outcome of the RAE Unit of Assessment 33, believing it to be unsound). Concentrating research funding for the built environment sector within the two institutions which received 5*, neither of which have expertise in the specific field of architecture, eliminates opportunities for cross disciplinary activity to include architecture and actively disadvantages the development of the architecture research base in existing schools.

3.2 Given the historic problems faced by schools of architecture submitting to RAE Unit of Assessment 33, some seven schools chose in the 2001 RAE exercise to submit to Unit of Assessment 64 (Art & Design). They did so because UoA 64 had clearly demonstrated a greater willingness to consider research outputs in the form of designs and exhibitions, not just refereed journal papers. These seven schools will now be eligible to bid for the £20 million capability fund announced in the HEFCE Recurrent Grant 2003-04 Document. This capability fund has been established to support research in emerging subject areas where the research base is currently not as strong as in more established subjects. One such area has been identified as 'Art and Design'. The RIBA would argue that such funding should be available to all schools of architecture whichever UoA they submitted to in 2001. The subject clearly needs exactly the kind of targeted support being provided by this capability fund.

3.3 The Government has stated its commitment to increasing the quality of our built environment and is sponsoring a significant building programme over the next five years to deliver its targets in health, education and urban regeneration. To not invest in our research base at this critical moment will mean that as a nation we will fail to reap the social and economic benefits of being at the forefront in architectural design and the delivery of a better built environment. Harnessing and developing the contribution of the architectural research community is central to delivering Government targets and can only be done if the resource base for research in architecture is secure.

3.4 We do not agree with the assertion that there is no connection between research excellence and teaching quality. RIBA Visiting Boards, consisting of senior academics and practitioners, visit schools of architecture every four/five years to validate their courses. The evidence they provide convinces the RIBA that there is a strong link between good research performance and good student output from architectural courses. The process of undertaking research and the consequential engagement with industry enriches educational provision within schools and helps to attract and retain the best staff and students. Whilst we understand the Government's motivation to fund the best performing research units to enhance their international competitiveness

and to retain the best researchers, further support must be given to existing research units which have the potential to contribute very significantly to the development of the profession's knowledge base.

3.5 Low salaries for both academic and research staff in architecture schools is causing recruitment difficulties. The RIBA welcomes proposals to enhance research pay and to provide further training and career development opportunities for junior research staff. The RIBA also welcomes the introduction of a 'Promising Researcher Fellowship Scheme' and hopes that as more money becomes available this is extended beyond the modest numbers proposed in 2004.

4. Expansion & Foundation Degrees

4.1 Fundamental to the Government's strategy is the proposal to increase participation of those aged 18-30 in higher education to 50%. The Institute questions whether this is a necessary target and whether foundation degrees will be a strong enough offer for young people from non-traditional backgrounds to enable this target to be met. Our experience of foundation degrees in the construction field has been disappointing, with low demand from target groups. We will be considering whether there is scope for a foundation degree in architectural design, leading to an affiliate category of RIBA membership. Of greater concern to us is the lack of clarity in the purpose of Foundation degrees. At present it is unclear whether they are seen as a stand-alone qualification leading to defined and fulfilling job roles within industry, or as a stepping stone to degree programmes.

4.2 Architectural courses do well in international student recruitment compared to the national average. In 2000-2001, 15.4% of architecture students entering first year were from overseas, as compared to the national average of 11%. We believe this is because Britain is a world leader in architectural education, because the work of our architects is internationally acclaimed and because the RIBA does much work overseas to raise the profile of UK systems of architectural education and promoting architecture. This strength could be damaged by a decline in teaching standards and/or by a reduction in our research capacity, the two key indicators of institutional quality overseas student use when choosing where to study.

5. Funding & Access

5.1 The RIBA recognises that extra investment in higher education should come from those who benefit most ie graduates, but that the system should ensure that those most disadvantaged in society still have the opportunity to study on lengthy courses such as architecture. We are pleased that the proposal is for graduates to defer repayment of tuition fees through the tax system rather than pay up-front at the outset of a course. However, we strongly recommend that the significant investment of public money in HE is continued when the Graduate Contribution Scheme is introduced in 2006 in order to restore the 1989 level of funding per student. To arrest the decline identified in the White Paper significant cash increase from HEFCE in real terms for teaching must be sustained year on year, over and above the new money identified for special projects up to and beyond 2006.

5.2 We support measures to give greater financial support to the poorest students, including the restoration of a maintenance grant and the raising of the income threshold at which student loans are paid back. We also support an extension of the maintenance grant, recognising that for many students from poor backgrounds a fear

of debt is a contributory factor in choosing not to study at degree level. The architectural profession has had a poor track record in recruiting and retaining women, ethnic minorities and those from low-income backgrounds. The RIBA has had success with projects such as 'Listen 'Up', undertaken with the Cabinet Office Women's Unit, which have targeted specific groups such as women and ethnic minorities. Our fear is that a combination of high graduate debt (we estimate up to £36,000 for architecture students) and low graduate salaries, (the architects-on-line salary survey, March 2003, indicate that average Part 2 graduate salaries on completion of year 5 is £17,125) will have an adverse effect on the recruitment of 'non-traditional' students. Any additional support for students from low-income families or students from families with no tradition in participation in HE will assist in recruiting from this segment of society.

5.3 It is unrealistic to expect employers of architectural graduates, 58% of whom employ 10 or less architectural staff, to assist in repaying student debts or to contribute to university endowment funds. The profession cannot sustain graduate 'golden hellos' except in the largest practices, where graduate recruitment is currently not an issue. Most small architectural practices are unable to offer bursaries and with normally lower salaries are likely to suffer the most in terms of attracting graduates. Consideration could be given by the Government to support specific measures for architectural students at little or no extra cost such as;

Deferring repayment of student loans and tuition fees until• after students have completed their Part Two qualification. (In other words no income contingent repayments are made during students' Stage One year out in industry, which normally occurs between years 3 and 4 of full time study).

- Enhancing student loan facilities to take into account the high course costs of architectural training.

- Provision of enhanced grants targeted to students• from non-traditional or low income backgrounds for the final two years of full time study to assist in student retention

5.4 The RIBA cannot reconcile the findings on page 84 item 7.25 of the White Paper which seems to indicate that the earnings premia of an architectural degree for women is second only to law and the recent study also by Warwick & Kent universities published in the Independent Education Supplement on 20 March 2003 (copy attached) which indicated that the lifeterm earnings for women in architecture are level with the average wages of a person with just 2 A-levels. Architecture is way down the list in terms of financial benefits - after law, health, business, maths, engineering, nursing and science and that in effect a degree in architecture is financially neutral. Further, the differential between men and women in architecture is greater than in any other subject - whereas in engineering and law earnings are higher for women than men and in other subjects male/female differentials are small. The Institute is currently interrogating the Council for Industry and Higher Education commissioned research from which the statistic in item 7.25 was drawn.

6. Teaching and Learning Excellence

6.1 Whilst more support and training for teachers and External Examiners is welcomed, this will need to be carefully structured to benefit schools of architecture which typically employ large numbers of practitioners on fractional or part-time contracts. Onerous obligations for such staff could limit their participation in HE, thereby restricting the education/practice dialogue. The RIBA supports the intention

to publish of summaries of external examiner reports on university web sites by 2004.

6.2 As mentioned in 2.4, above, low salaries for academic staff in architecture schools is causing recruitment difficulties. The RIBA welcomes the statement in the white paper that teaching should be valued as a high status career in its own right. However, unless additional resource is available to universities to enhance teaching pay, current difficulties in recruiting staff from the profession, especially architects with highly specialised skills from larger practices, will remain.

For further information on this response please contact [Leonie Milliner](#), RIBA Director of Education, 66 Portland Place, London, W1B 1AD.

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