

Should architecture schools reduce student numbers?

15 March 2013

As architectural unemployment rises, do we need to cut back on those training to enter the profession?



AA students get practical experience at the school's Hooke Park campus in Dorset.

Owen Luder

Former RIBA president

Why have architects lost their traditional role of leading the design and construction team?

Why have we been reduced in 50 years from the top three in the "professional" earnings league to nearly bottom? Why are we seen by many in the construction industry as no more than creative designers?

Why? Because architects have no training in management skills or managing the construction of buildings, in managing people, in financial management.

Despite the enormous changes over the last 50 years, architectural education has hardly changed from the system set up in the mid-1960s. It concentrates largely on creative design. Few tutors have experience in practising what they teach. Links with practice are still weak and most students are ill equipped to start work in practices.

There is still a culture within architectural education of "we are not there to provide employment fodder for architectural practices".

Architecture is a demand-led occupation. It is not an end in itself but the provision of a platform for the student to go on to a rewarding career in architectural practice in its various specialised roles. Or in the wider construction industry or on the boards of companies where the important decisions are made.

Too many architects are being educated without the skills to exploit the wider opportunities created by the enormous changes in construction and the way we practise. We must be seen and able to operate as far more than creative designers, as important as that is.

The RIBA, Arb and the schools should now set up urgently a powerful joint group to study and advise on the changes that are required — not to produce fewer architects, but more with the wider range of specialised skills needed in the world as it is, rather than as it was, and not as perhaps we would like it to be.

Alex Wright

Head of architecture at Bath University

Given the employment situation revealed by the BD survey last week it's perhaps sadly predictable that there have been calls for architecture schools to cut their intakes.

Presumably this is based on the assumption that fewer architecture students would mean fewer architects, which would mean high levels of employment and better fee levels. Unfortunately this assumption doesn't bear scrutiny.

The number of UK-trained architects on the register has seen little change in the last five years despite a rise in student numbers since 2000. The increase in registered architects has come largely from architects trained in other EU member states deciding to join the UK register via the EU mutual recognition route.

Between 2008 and 12 (inclusive), the number of architects on the UK register increased by 1,853. In the same period, 2,058 joined it through the mutual recognition EU route. Cutting the numbers of architecture students in the UK won't necessarily cut the number of architects.

The proposal suggests that schools should be forced to tell qualified applicants, eager to study architecture, "Sorry you can't, pick something else instead". Is this likely to create a society better equipped to value design in the built environment? Should the UK also ban students from studying history if the job market for historians looks grim?

In reality, the majority of architecture graduates use what they learn in other careers. Countries like the Netherlands have proportionally more trained architects than the UK yet their fee earnings are higher. In the long run, part of the solution might be to have more clients and decision-makers who have an appreciation of the importance of architecture. Of course, a good way to get that is to study the subject.