

AASA

Association of Architecture Schools of Australasia

31 July, 2008

Secretariat
Review of Australian Higher Education
GPO Box 9880
Canberra ACT 2601

HEReview@deewr.gov.au

Dear Sir or Madam,

Attached to this letter is a submission to the **Review of Australian Higher Education** on behalf of the Association of Architecture Schools of Australasia (AASA).

The AASA is an unincorporated association representing accredited architecture programs in Australia. It aims to provide leadership and advocacy for architectural education in Australasia. Among its objectives is to identify, develop and support research, scholarship and creative work in relation to architecture and the design environment in the context of architectural education, and welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this Review of Australian Higher Education.

Declaration of Interests and Affiliations:

Members of the AASA received grants from several government sources, including the Australian Research Council, and several of its members are partners in CRC's.

Yours sincerely

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**Review of Australian Higher Education
Submission by the Association of Architecture Schools of Australasia
(AASA)
July 31, 2008**

1. Greater funding for architecture programs

The government contribution to the funding of architecture programs in Australia requires revisiting. The 'twin functions' of teaching and research (Section 1.1) are diminished by lack of funding of architecturally related research, and the undermining of teaching through the inadequate provision of teaching resources. Currently, architecture programs in Australia are heavily subsidized by part time or sessional teaching appointments of practicing professionals, masking the malaise in the teaching staffs of architectural schools in Australia.

Changes in the use of technology in the building industry and in architectural production will continue in architectural education, with continual pressure on cost of computer infrastructure (Cf. 'Costs,' Section 2.6, p. 15). These pressures are, in part, driven by student demand. The review notes that because of the shift of costs to students, they are "Increasingly demanding consumers, focussed on the cost and outcomes of their courses and the quality of the student experience" (Section 2.5, p. 12).

The Review document recognises that significant growth in student numbers accompanied by falling numbers of teaching staff has led to alarming student-staff ratios in universities, from 12.9 in 1990 to 20.3 in 2005 (Section 2.6, p. 13). The lack of resources in the higher education sector has led to problems of deferred maintenance, estimated in the Review document to be as high as \$2 billion (Section 2.6). This pressure on accommodation has distorted the teaching of the traditional architecture design studio, with many universities pressured to abandon this design practice, considered by many architects to be at the heart of an architectural education.

2. Generational change

The task of recruiting academics in the next three decades is acknowledged as a significant challenge given that more than 30% of staff in the academic workforce are aged over 50 (Section 2.5, p.12). In addition, approximately 50% of current architectural practitioners are over 50 and heading for retirement. Currently missing from the hierarchy of teaching and research appointments are teaching assistants and junior academics encouraged to forge a life in an academic discipline within architecture schools.

3. Access: the removal of impediments

In Section 3.1, page 26 the question is asked regarding the removal of impediments to access to higher education. Members of the AASA have recently moved to the Bologna model, with a three-year undergraduate degree followed by a two-year master of architecture

by coursework degree. Over time this will assist the movement into the profession of mature age graduates from other professions.

The question is also asked: "Are there impediments to the higher education sector being able to innovate in the development of courses and programs?"

The number of teaching weeks is short in Australian schools, compared to some other countries. In Australia, teaching is often 2 semesters @ 12 or 13 weeks = max 26 weeks per year. In Europe, many universities have 3 semesters @ 10, 11 and 10 weeks = 31 weeks per year. Therefore, over a 5 year course, Australian architecture students receive 25 weeks less teaching than many overseas students - ie: approximately one academic year less. Attempts to educate Australian students comparably with their international peers, and to satisfy the training requirements of the Australian professional bodies, in this reduced time, restricts the ability to innovate.

Current funding levels result in insufficient staffing and very excessive workloads for many, restricting their ability to innovate in course development. Funding restrictions on the purchase of digital-related equipment limit the development of innovative courses in this essential area of research and teaching.

The access of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to architecture programs in Australia continues to be difficult, noting that indigenous students comprise only 1.25% of the commencing student population (Section 3.2, p. 29). In response to Question 9, page 34, a national approach to ensure equity in opportunity seems warranted. The AASA recommends targeted programs facilitating support for indigenous architecture students in existing indigenous assistance units embedded within Australian universities.

While access by students from low socio-economic status backgrounds continues to be an issue, with a 10% discrepancy between the 15% of places compared with a population reference of 25% (Section 3.2, p. 29). Reduction of student fees in the higher education sector would assist the overcoming of this discrepancy, and a program of financial support for accommodation for rural disadvantaged in major cities where architecture schools are mostly located. The cost of accommodation for low socio-economic status students from indigenous or rural backgrounds in architecture programs is arguably the most significant barrier to participation. Greater access to income-support, is urgently required. It is therefore alarming that there was an increase in the rejection of applications for income support in 2006 compared with 2000 (Section 3.2, p. 32), and that while 70% of students received some income support, it is insufficient to support students in time-costly educational studies, such as architecture programs (Section 3.2, p. 34).

Question 5 (p. 26) asks: Are there particular examples of good practice where you can demonstrate either rapid response to skill shortages or successful initiatives to improve generic skills? In terms of successful initiatives to improve generic skills, architecture has been reasonably successful in equipping students to respond to the environmental crisis, even before it gained its

current level of public recognition. This is an issue architectural education has been working on since at least the early 1970's.

4. Cost of Accommodation

Similarly, the cost of accommodation in major cities where architecture programs are located means that most architecture students work several days a week, a situation that has changed the character of architectural education in Australia over the last fifteen years. Many architecture programs are now effectively 'part-time', even while expecting a full-time commitment from students. This has led to greater stress on students and the staff who teach them. A reduction in HECS-Help and the expansion of the Youth Allowance provisions, including the elimination of means testing for eligibility, would greatly assist the support of students, and further offer opportunities to enhance the educational experience of architecture programs.

5. Student Staff Ratios

Question 12 asks: "Is there evidence that declining student staff ratios have impacted on the quality of student experience?" The reduction of funding and staff in Australian university architecture programs over the last ten years has led to the undermining of student educational experience of design studios, where architecture students work individually or in groups on projects in studio or mock-office settings. Architectural design taught in studio settings is still considered best pedagogical practice for this discipline, and is the hallmark of the architectural education of the leading schools of architecture in the UK, Europe and the USA. Larger class sizes, and fewer teaching staff with lessened hours in design studios have become increasingly characteristic of Australian architecture schools in the last ten years. The introduction of rent for studio and lecture space in some Australian universities further undermines the integrity of the discipline of architectural design education. There is compelling evidence that the quality of student architectural work diminishes where studios are abandoned, and where students become 'commuters' to classes, rather than being actively involved in the breadth of a studio design experience.

6. Voluntary Student Unionism

The introduction by the Howard Government of voluntary student unionism (see page 36) has further eroded the opportunities for women with children for the study of architecture, reducing access to child care. The other impact of the withdrawal of financial support for student clubs has had a significant impact on the activities of architecture clubs in Australia, diminishing the educational experience of architecture students.

7. Links to Vocational Training

Section 3.4 concerns links with universities to the vocational training sector. Most architecture programs in Australia have strong linkages with vocational programs in the TAFE institutions, sometimes with shared training in CAD or other IT teaching, and articulated pathways for students, especially for Advanced Diplomas in Building Design or their equivalent. These have proved often to be effective access vehicles or 'feeders' (p. 40) to architecture programs, especially for low economic status students. However, some

schools have missed experience of the success of TAFE students undertaking degrees. Some used to have a system of formally streamlining TAFE students to their degree, but these links have been suspended. There is less confidence amongst AASA members in private training institutions in Australia, notably those in offering courses in building design or interior design.

Question 15 asks: "To what extent should vocational education and training and higher education continue to have distinctive missions and how should these missions be defined?"

Architectural courses are accredited by the professional licensing bodies, which are currently reviewing their priorities in the face of the continually enlarging necessary knowledge-base of the discipline, and the reduced staff - student contact time at most (or all) Australian universities. At issue is the degree to which a university architecture course should offer a distinctive, academic 'vocational education' rather than a 'vocational training' related to the 'competency standards' established by the licensing bodies. It is necessary that the accrediting bodies very clearly define the mission they wish the universities to perform, and then support the universities in that mission. It is relevant to note that the National Protocols (see this document page 45) astutely specify the focus of universities as "sustained scholarship".

8. Innovation and research

In regard to the promotion of research in architectural disciplines, question 19 (p. 50) asks: "By what mechanism should research activities in Australian universities be supported?"

Architecture programs are uniquely positioned to advance the links between innovation and teaching, the 'Teaching -Research nexus,' (p.45), research and the building industry. Unhappily, the reduction of funding in architecture programs since the 1980's has led to the systematic erosion of both teaching and research disciplines, especially in building structures and construction, lighting and heating, materials science, acoustics, and mechanical systems. Many of these disciplines are critical to our understanding of a sustainable future for our cities. It is estimated that built environment industries contribute 23% of greenhouse gas emissions, and that innovation in education and architectural practice are urgently required to promote sustainable building practices.

The absence of employment continuity, pressure on laboratory space, and the cost of maintaining the infrastructure needed to support these architectural sciences have all conspired to undermine architectural scientific research in Australia. In an age of global warming, these sciences are critically needed for the development of a sustainable architecture in Australia. While there have been worthy grant applicants each year to the Australian Research Council (ARC), in some years no grants have been made to architecturally related research, either in the strong history and theory and design research areas or to architectural materials science. The base for architectural science research has been eroded by several factors, including the withdrawal of funding within Universities, and the lack of opportunity for grants from either industry or government, the withdrawal of funding for teaching units in architectural

acoustics and material sciences within architecture programs, the retirement of prominent architectural scientists without succession planning in universities. As the report notes: "Appropriate public funding to support good research performance in Australia's universities is an important issue for public policy." (p. 49) In order to address these factors, a beginning can be immediately made in making more available doctoral and post-doctoral research fellowships for architecturally related research in architectural history and theory, design research and architectural sciences. In addition, junior lecturing or research positions offering a career for architectural research within universities are urgently required to address generational change in both teaching and research. As the Report notes on page 63: "Nurturing and developing the careers of the later group is key to meeting the challenge of the ageing academic workforce and international competition for academic staff."

9. Internationalisation

Questions 22 through 24 concern the encouragement of internationalisation of Australian educational programs. Support for the internationalisation of programs assists the education of architecture students facing the demands of a global economy, and the changing 'economic, social and environmental order' recognised in the June 2008 Discussion Paper. (Section 1.1) The Review notes that Australian students appear to be "less mobile" than students from other countries (Section 2.4).

Question 22 asks: "Are there any unintended consequences of the current approach to internationalism of higher education in Australia?"

The language skills of many overseas students who have achieved good IELTS scores are often weak - causing concern for the credibility of the IELTS system. Students with weak English skills become isolated, to a degree, from those students fluent in the language, and require more attention from over-worked staff. While overseas student fees contribute significantly to the financial health of the universities, they require 'care' which most universities are not sufficiently staffed, or organised to provide. In addition, some international students lack 'critical' skills, and 'initiative' in their tasks (i.e. they want to be directed what to do). This is perhaps a result of the pre-tertiary educational experience in their home country.

The expected growth in international students of 4.24% to 2010, and then slower growth of three per cent to 2015, further assists the internationalisation of architecture programs in Australia. While architectural faculties have contributed significantly to the support of international students, where 14.9% of revenue to Australian universities comes from international student fees, increased internationalisation of architectural education requires further funding support. The enabling of students and staff to undertake offshore activities is especially important to architectural education, and joint ventures in design education are valuable when they occur. The acceptance by AASA members of the Bologna model (See page 53) in 2006 further supported the

possibilities of international mobility, credit recognition, and joint educational opportunities. International recognition of accreditation processes in Australia was furthered this year by the Canberra Accord signed by the Australian Institute of Architects, which will benefit graduates of Australian Architectural programs after 2010 in many countries, including the UK, USA, China, Korea and Canada. Exchange relationships are particularly effective, but are hampered by the cost of airfares to students. Funding subsidies for student travel -related international design workshops and exchanges of students, such as promoted in Scandanavian countries and the Netherlands, would greatly assist architectural education opportunities for Australian students.

10. Knowledge transfer and community participation

Questions 25 through 27 (p. 57) concern the 'third stream,' or knowledge transfer in communities. Architecture programs set their student design projects mostly within communities, often in response to community enterprises. Appropriate responses to the ethical context within which architecture is produced is an underlying theme in accredited architecture programs in Australia. Knowledge transfer and community engagement are, of course, appropriate activities for universities, since - aside from all other reasons - they make explicit to the community the reasons for public funding support. The UK's 'third stream funding' system (see page 55) appears an appropriate model.

11. Resourcing the System

Question 28 asks: "What incentives or unintended consequences are there in the current arrangements for higher education funding?"

With only 26 teaching weeks per year, it is legitimate for full-time academics to be required to contribute to the expansion of knowledge through both 'traditional' research and research via creative endeavour - which supports the academic's personal growth in scholarship. However, the assumed (ie: un-proven, see para 4, page 62) financial dependency of courses on the research output of their staff causes problems for vocational courses such as architecture, in which creative endeavour (which is only contentiously measured as 'research') rather than 'traditional' research output, is what advances the discipline. It has been observed that research projects are skewed toward what is likely to be funded, rather than what is of benefit to the community or the researcher.

12. Governance, Quality Assurance and Regulation

Questions 31 through 35 (p. 75) concern governance and quality assurance. Architecture programs in Australia undergo a thorough accreditation process on a national basis with the Architects Accreditation Council of Australia (AACA), which represents state and territory Boards of Architects. This accreditation and quality assurance process is also accompanied by a recognition of programs by the Australian Institute of Architects (AIA). These processes are regularly reviewed and maintained, and support the quality of architectural education in Australia. De-regulation of these accreditation and recognition processes would severely affect the standing of architecture graduates from Australian universities nationally and internationally in regard to their progress to registration as architects.

Question 35 asks: "Is there more that could be done to improve university governance? How should this be done?"

University 'governors' (and national government ministers of education) tend to be familiar with the needs and ways of the 'pure' academic disciplines but not with the 'applied' academic disciplines, such as architecture. Consequently, funding models are biased towards 'pure' academic disciplines and away from 'applied'

disciplines - which is detrimental to architectural education. Government higher-education strategies and funding should be structured so that both 'pure' and 'applied' disciplines are acknowledged sympathetically, especially with regard to appropriate funding and appointments. A 'one size fits all' funding/appointments policy is inappropriate for achieving excellence in all areas.

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