



Australian Senate Education and Employment References Committee

Inquiry into Australian University Graduates

Executive Summary

The Association of Consulting Architects (ACA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Senate Education and Employment References Committee inquiry into Australian university graduates.

As an employer and business-focused organisation representing 850 member practices, the ACA is deeply concerned with the capacity of architectural practices to employ, train and develop students and graduates into competent, self-sufficient professionals. Our members currently employ approximately 1,500 graduate architects and 300 students, a significant pipeline of emerging talent whose progression toward registration and future leadership depends on the quality of the training and support they receive in practice.

Architecture is a useful case study for the inquiry because the pathway from university to work is not a single transition. It involves a staged progression through:

- tertiary education
- early exposure to practice
- supervised employment
- professional development
- completion of prescribed practical experience
- the Architectural Practice Examination, including written, logbook and interview components
- registration as an architect; and
- ongoing continuing professional development to maintain registration.

Graduate employability depends on the health of this whole pipeline, not only on the quality of university education or the readiness of individual graduates. Graduate employment in architecture should be treated as a construction capability, professional pipeline and practice viability issue — not only as a university education issue.

Architects help define projects, coordinate consultants, manage design quality, support approvals, prepare documentation, advise during construction and contribute to safety, sustainability, productivity and whole-of-life value. A weak graduate pipeline affects more than individual graduates; it creates risks to employers, clients, governments, the broader construction economy, and consumers.

Australian architectural education offers great strengths in design thinking, creativity, spatial reasoning, research and critical inquiry. However, many graduates need more consistent exposure to the practical, regulatory, technical and commercial realities of practice.

The profession contributes significantly to education and graduate formation. Practising architects teach part-time, participate in design reviews, mentor students, host placements and then carry the cost of training graduates once they enter practice. That contribution is valuable, but it is often under-recognised and under-remunerated. In many cases, senior practitioners are contributing time to universities at rates materially below the commercial value of their time, while also losing time from their own practices.

The ACA's central submission is that a sustainable graduate pipeline requires properly resourced universities, fair and paid work-integrated learning, stronger alignment between education and practice, viable architectural businesses, and recognition of the real employer cost of graduate supervision and training.



Key Recommendations

The ACA recommends that the Committee support the following actions:

1. Recognise architecture and built environment disciplines as part of Australia's national construction capability pipeline, essential to housing, public infrastructure, climate resilience, safety, design quality and productivity.
2. Strengthen and better resource the existing education-to-registration pathway for architecture, including clearer support for the transition from university education to supervised practice, professional experience and registration.
3. Support ongoing review of the National Standard of Competency for Architects, architectural education, accreditation and registration settings to ensure that expectations placed on universities, employers and registration processes are clear, realistic and appropriately resourced.
4. Support paid and structured work-integrated learning, with particular attention to students from regional, low-income and under-represented backgrounds.
5. Recognise and support the hidden cost to employers of graduate formation, particularly the senior staff time required for supervision, mentoring, review, correction, technical instruction and quality assurance.
6. Improve funding and support for practice-connected architectural education, including fair remuneration for practising architects who teach, review, mentor or contribute to curriculum delivery.
7. Improve data collection on architecture graduate outcomes, including underemployment, pay, progression to registration, attrition, regional impacts, equity of access and the cost to employers of graduate training.

Why this matters beyond architecture

Architecture is a critical enabling profession within Australia's construction economy. Architects sit at the front end of project definition, design quality, planning, documentation, consultant coordination, regulatory compliance, procurement support and construction-phase problem solving.

Although architects are only one part of the broader construction workforce, their work has an outsized influence on project quality, risk, coordination, cost certainty, buildability, sustainability, approvals and whole-of-life value. Australia's ability to deliver housing, schools, hospitals, aged care, justice facilities, civic buildings, community infrastructure and climate-resilient places depends on a viable pipeline of capable design professionals.

A weak graduate-to-practice pathway creates risks across the system. Graduates may face underemployment, delayed career progression, financial stress and loss of confidence. Employers face higher supervision demands, reduced productivity and increased caution about hiring. Projects can be affected by slower documentation, greater checking, coordination gaps, rework, requests for information, variations, delay and dispute risk.

For government and public clients, this becomes a long-term capability risk. The graduate pipeline is not a narrow professional issue; it is part of Australia's ability to deliver its built environment agenda.

The entry-level job market and practice viability

The entry-level job market for architecture graduates is closely connected to the health of the broader building and development sector. When project pipelines are strong, and practices have confidence in future workload, they are more likely to employ and train students and graduates. When markets soften, early-career roles become more limited, and practices may be less able to absorb the cost and risk of graduate employment. Practices need stable workloads, fair fees, reasonable risk allocation and enough senior capacity to supervise early-career employees.



Graduate employment should therefore not be framed only around whether individual graduates are 'job ready'. The demand side also matters. Practices need the commercial confidence and senior capacity to employ, supervise and train early-career staff. Architectural practices cannot sustainably train graduates if fees are compressed, scopes are poorly defined, programs are unrealistic, risk is transferred unfairly, or procurement rewards lowest price rather than capability and value. Procurement reform and graduate employment are connected because weak fee structures reduce the capacity of practices to invest in supervision, mentoring and training.

The hidden cost to employers of graduate formation

ACA members consistently report that the cost of training students and graduates is real, substantial and difficult to quantify. It is not limited to formal training sessions or software instruction. It includes the daily investment of senior staff in explaining construction systems, reviewing drawings, correcting documentation, teaching consultant coordination, guiding client communication, checking compliance, introducing practice systems and helping graduates understand how design decisions translate into buildable and commercially deliverable projects.

A graduate may be employed at an entry-level salary, but the true cost to the practice includes the time of senior architects, project leaders, associates, principals and directors who must supervise, review and often redo work until the graduate develops sufficient judgement, speed and technical capability. That supervision time is frequently non-recoverable, or only partly recoverable, under current fee structures.

Anecdotal feedback from ACA members indicates that it can take a considerable period before a student or graduate reaches the level of skill, productivity, judgement and reliability required to contribute to project delivery in a way that supports practice profitability. This is not a criticism of graduates. It reflects the complexity of architectural practice and the gap between academic learning and live project delivery.

The burden is especially significant for small and medium practices. The same senior staff who train graduates are also responsible for delivering projects, maintaining client relationships, managing fees, reviewing quality, managing risk and keeping the practice commercially viable. If practices cannot absorb these costs, they may become more cautious about hiring graduates. This creates a negative cycle: graduates need experience to become employable, but employers have reduced capacity to provide that first experience.

The ACA submits that the cost of graduate formation should be recognised as a shared investment in national professional capability, not left almost entirely to individual employers.

Reduced investment in education and the shifting burden onto practice

Architecture education is intensive, studio-based and practice-facing. It depends not only on academic staff, but also on practising architects who bring current knowledge of procurement, regulation, documentation, construction, project delivery, client expectations and commercial practice.

This connection with practice is a strength of architectural education, but it is also a vulnerability. Where universities face funding, staffing and workload pressure, professional education can become increasingly reliant on the goodwill and availability of practitioners who teach part-time. This work is typically remunerated at hourly rates materially below the commercial value of a practitioner's time. It also often involves unpaid non-contact time, including course preparation, student review, assessment, coordination and follow-up.

For architectural practices, practitioner teaching is not cost-neutral. When a director, principal, senior architect or project architect teaches in a university studio, critiques student work, contributes to reviews, mentors students or assists with curriculum engagement, that time is taken away from clients, projects, staff supervision, fee-earning work and business development. While this



contribution should continue, it should be recognised as a shared investment in professional capability, not an unlimited source of free or low-cost industry input.

If education-sector resourcing declines, or if universities are unable to maintain strong practice-based teaching, more practical formation is shifted downstream to employers. This increases the hidden cost of employment and may make practices more cautious about hiring graduates. The profession should not be expected to compensate indefinitely for under-investment in professional education through unpaid goodwill, low-paid practitioner teaching and unrecoverable employer training time.

University education, competency and practice readiness

The design, research, cultural, environmental and critical thinking strengths of Australian architectural education must be protected. However, graduates would benefit from stronger and more consistent exposure to the realities of practice.

The existing education-to-registration pathway should be better supported and periodically reviewed to ensure that responsibility for professional readiness is appropriately shared. This includes clarifying what is best taught and assessed at university, what requires simulated or project-based academic exposure, what is best developed through paid work-integrated learning, what requires supervised professional experience, and what should be demonstrated through registration.

If universities are required to demonstrate too many practice-based competencies in an already crowded curriculum, education can become overburdened while still not producing the practical readiness employers need. A staged approach would better reflect how professional capability actually develops.

Work-integrated learning and fair employment

Work-integrated learning is critical to graduate employability in architecture. Students who gain meaningful, paid and supervised practice experience are more likely to understand the profession, develop confidence, build networks, improve technical skills and transition successfully into employment.

Access to experience is uneven. Students with financial support, metropolitan proximity or professional networks are often better placed to obtain experience. Students from regional, low-income or under-represented backgrounds may face greater barriers.

The ACA supports expanded work-integrated learning, but it must be properly structured and paid where productive work is performed. The solution to graduate readiness cannot be unpaid labour. It should include clear guidance on student employment, paid placement models, regional support, incentives for small and medium practices to host students, and recognition of employer supervision time.

Fair employment is part of professional formation. Students and graduates should understand award classification, working hours, overtime, timesheets, supervision, professional conduct and progression toward registration. Employers also need clear and practical support to provide good early-career environments while operating under commercial constraints.

Conclusion

The ACA encourages the Committee to view graduate employment as a shared responsibility across education, employment, professional regulation, procurement and industry policy.

For architecture, the transition from university to work requires more than generic employability skills. It requires a coordinated pathway from education to practice and registration, supported by properly



resourced universities, paid work-integrated learning, viable practice settings, fair employment, structured supervision and recognition of the cost borne by employers.

A weak graduate pipeline is not only a problem for individual graduates. It is a risk to the construction economy and to Australia's long-term built environment capability.

The ACA notes the parallel submission made by the Australian Institute of Architects. This submission is complementary and adds an employer/practice perspective on the cost, responsibility and capacity required to develop graduates into capable, registration-ready professionals.

The ACA would welcome the opportunity to provide further evidence to the Committee and to participate in any public hearing or roundtable relevant to architecture, built environment education, graduate employment and professional practice.

The ACA welcomes further dialogue on this submission. Please contact Advocacy Manager Emma Brain at emma.brain@aca.org.au.