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Whether you heard it or not last month, a starting gun has been fired for architectural schools

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forum on UK architectural education. Council members, educators, practitioners and students were invited to consider recommendations from the Institute's Review of Architectural Education: a discreetly formed panel tasked with responding to the EU's revised Professional Qualifications Directive (PQD) – set to become law next year. And while I arrived late – I was too busy teaching architecture to have the chance to inform it – what took place that day will change the face of UK architectural education.

The water cooler conversation summary is this: the holy trinity of Part I, Part II and Part III has finally reached its dodo moment. I don't mean an RIP end to said parts, but that time is RIPE for change, through Radical Integration of Practical Experience into school curricula.

In other words, the collective vote on the proposals means that from September 2016, the usual 24 months of practical training experience will be integrated into the university programme. In general, schools will offer students the option to study within a framework of four years full-time study and three years professional practical experience; two parts, rather than three, hence the fratricide of the traditional triptych. More important, though, is the fact that those who successfully complete this integrated university programme will now be offered the opportunity to become a legally registered architect. Not only does this give UK qualifying students the same graduating-as-an-architect award as their EU counterparts; it may also end the practice of some firms to employ students but withhold the Part III case study experience needed to breach the qualification gateway in order to keep paying them less.

### **Constraint or freedom?**

For many Brits however, EU laws translate into EU constraints. It's not that we don't get why EU parity is a good idea, it's just that we like our regionally defining traditions, even if no one else gets them (cue Morris dancing architects nodding with bearded sagacity). And yet, this revision to our dear old education infrastructure is anything but constraining.

'The dissolution of the triptych will offer the schools greater flexibility in setting the structure and delivery of their programmes and set more

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the structure and delivery of their programmes and set more distinct agendas. Since practices have been specialising for years, surely it's time that education made a bolder effort to follow suit? And while traditions are all very well, surely curricula 'calcification' endangers our efforts to develop the educational experiences that best enable a commercially competitive and socially responsive architecture profession of tomorrow?

### **Implications for schools**

While curricula freedoms will likely translate into commercial capacity building, the unspoken implications of the decisions taken last week are that schools must now figure out how to implement them. Fortunately, the RIBA emphasised its intention to support schools in this, encouraging an even more liberal interpretation of its school sanctioning Criteria for Validation. Perhaps for once irony is its own reward: the criteria is often criticised for not being specific enough, but is now permitted to be even more liberally interpreted. Yet redefining the skillset of students may also mean up-skilling the educators needed to deliver the new models. If schools are legally obliged to implement these changes in time for the September 2016 undergrads, they have little time to radically alter or invent new current course structures and get them through university and national Quality Assurance Assessment (QAA) approvals.

### **Implications for practices**

Architecture is one of the few professions where practitioners often hold highly critical views on their value and the relevance of their educational experience. But this change means that both practices and schools will need to rise above the old rhetoric about fit-for-practice graduates and better collaborate over curricula content and delivery.

*'Creative speculation will need to be earned through a struggle to design in response to real rather than imagined priorities of practice'*

Subsequently, practice involvement in schools will prove even more important and may even herald a new era of model university/industry partnerships – thankfully without the cynicism of global brand coffee concessions currently

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a new phase of (desirable) tension and instability. Creative speculation will need to be earned through a struggle to design in response to real rather than imagined priorities of practice – or the wider society practices should be focussed on serving.

## Opportunities and tensions

Reducing the length of architectural education – to bring it in line with the shorter routes to qualification offered by our EU educational competitors – may offer a tantalisingly quick win on making a career in architecture not only affordable but possibly more accessible. This is because requiring fewer years to be spent paying for school, working under-paid in practices or, worse still, toiling in unpaid practice ‘exploiternships’, reduces the financial burden on UK-based students and may re-incentivise those from more diverse and less affluent backgrounds to choose architecture as a career. Furthermore, the qualifying requirement for direct client engagement will mean more schools offering live projects – proto-practical construction projects that are often community situated and engaged. Such projects often bring direct and tangible benefits to local communities, and improve both students’ client engagement skills and public perception of the profession as a whole.

However, schools less able to set a creatively distinct agenda may seize the opportunity to increase their competitiveness by offering even shorter courses, making the requisite training more affordable still. While this might make economic sense on one level, the risk is that a two-tier qualification system may emerge, and reinforce the lack of diversity educators have been fighting against, particularly since the recession began. For all of us, but especially schools, taking immediate action will stop flexibility turning into free fall. Change might be a given, but positive change still needs someone to design it. And rather than a gun to the back, a demand for change is more a starting gun for passionate educators, participation-inclined practitioners and engaged students to leap forward and develop more innovative and spatially and socially relevant routes to qualification.

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