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Maintaining Access to Architecture: A Scottish Perspective

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ABSTRACT Widening access to education has been a central priority of the Scottish Government since 2010, with the objective of assisting those from disadvantaged backgrounds to enter higher education. Accordingly, the Scottish Funding Council introduced the ‘ACES’ project that specifically seeks to increase access to the creative arts and architecture. In parallel, a new educational system has been developed in Scotland over the last decade, titled ‘Curriculum for Excellence’. Its introduction has raised concerns of under-representation in curricular areas such as art and design, and consequently of a potential limiting of access to architecture education. In response, Robert Gordon University (RGU) in Aberdeen developed a joint project between its schools of Architecture & Built Environment and Art & Design, involving partnerships with regional secondary education providers. This paper explains the ACES project at RGU, and raises broader questions provoked by this work about the accepted orthodoxies for entry to architecture education.

KEYWORDS Widening access, arts, architecture, curriculum, Scotland

Introduction

As a result of an ambitious political agenda, the landscape in Scottish education has been undergoing significant transformation on a number of levels, and the effects are evident in multiple ways. Underpinned by the ideology of education as a fundamental right, and hence remaining free to the student,¹ there has been a drive to democratise access to learning across all sectors of society. This has led to specific

performance targets being applied to universities as a condition of core funding.

On another level, the last decade has seen the development and implementation of ‘Curriculum for Excellence’ with the aim of providing ‘a coherent, more flexible and enriched curriculum from 3 to 18.’² This reform has not been without its critics, and its implementation has generated some concerns that are of indirect consequence for

architecture education as well as access to art and design degrees. Crucially, the much lauded subject breadth that characterised the Scottish secondary system has been replaced by a narrower subject choice, a phenomenon that within prevailing cultures of understanding and value systems favours particular subjects to the detriment of others. At the heart of this tension lies art and design provision.

Cumulatively, this level of change presents a complex landscape for universities to navigate within, with a number of challenges for access and recruitment to architecture education specifically. However, it is argued that the ways in which the Scottish sector responds to these changes begins to challenge conventional assumptions and review the basis on which access to architecture education is gained.

Broader questions regarding the models for application to, and access of architectural education are of critical concern. The potential for fewer applicants to creative subjects due to their lack of experience or knowledge of career opportunities, places increasing responsibility on tertiary education to revise its liaison, application, and entry requirements in order to address this changing context. Indeed, it is this limiting of access to creative education in the secondary curriculum that places tertiary level architecture and art and design subjects at risk of losing their potency, and ultimately their social relevance. This is critically important when considering the contribution that the creative disciplines make to creative economies that sustain culture, urban regeneration, arts and business infrastructure, and so on.

Widening Access: A Political Imperative

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) established an 'Access and Inclusion Committee' in 2008 with the remit of advising the Scottish Government on matters of inclusion, diversity, and equality; implementing a policy of learning for all, with particular consideration given to deprived socio-economic groups; and the allocation of funding to best progress the policy of widening access. In parallel, the work of a separate Commission for Developing Scotland's Young Workforce has its own set of educational implications.³

Leverage for the Widening Access agenda comes through the 'Outcome Agreements' individually negotiated between individual higher education institutions and the SFC, which set performance expectations against a number of metrics. These include the number of student enrolments coming from the two most disadvantaged quintiles of society. In late 2014, a Commission of Widening Access was constituted to further develop progress towards the ultimate objective of 20% of university entrants coming from the most disadvantaged 20% of the population.⁴

More specifically, strategic funding was made available to 4 HEIs for a programme under the banner of 'Access to Creative Arts and Architecture' (ACES), these areas being identified as giving access to 'high demand professions.'⁵ ACES is part of a national project which aims to encourage applications from pupil groups that are typically under-represented in art, design and architecture courses at university, and to enable the making of informed choices about degree level study in these areas. As such, the initiative seeks to target the consequences of poverty, such as access to culture, the absence of familial histories of university study, and hence of perceptions of, and confidence in, university study as a viable personal option.

The agenda of ACES is particularly pertinent to architecture, which remains a profession whose membership remains exclusive in socio-economic, ethnicity, and gender terms. Thus the legacy of the Oxford Conference of 1958 endures in the attitudes and actions of many educational institutions, as well as in many educators. Stevens' (1998) dissection of the profession's behaviours in this respect is highly astute and reveals a system hitherto designed to replicate its profile socially, culturally, and economically.⁶ Based on plurality and widening access, it is argued that the values of contemporary education are diametrically opposed to the spirit of the Oxford Conference.⁷ Moreover, as higher education remains the gatekeeper to education, it follows that schools of architecture shoulder the primary responsibility for determining the profession's composition, and its relationship to that of the society that it serves.

The ACES programme across all HEIs is delivered with the expectation that recruitment into Architecture and Art & Design courses

from the two most disadvantaged quintile postcodes will increase. The use of postcodes as a measure of ‘disadvantage’ is by its nature a blunt tool as the various characteristics of disadvantage cannot be wholly determined in this way. For example, such characteristics include single parent families, gender or racial background, or indeed those who are the first in the family to go into higher education.

The Local Context

Aberdeen is generally considered to be an affluent area with a buoyant economy. However, the region has stubbornly persistent pockets of severe deprivation with attendant low educational attainment levels. This insight reaffirmed the need to ensure the ACES programme at RGU was designed, marketed and targeted effectively, focusing on relevant cohorts to maximise the pool of potential applicants from the two most deprived quintiles of the population (MD40). To this end, attainment and higher education progression rates for local schools were analysed, which identified a core group of partner schools with which to collaborate.

The University’s Response: ACCESS RGU

A key outcome of the ACES project has been a framework to enable the development of a partnership across academic and professional support staff in the pursuance of widening access. Undoubtedly, the most significant outcome of the ACES project has been the adaptation of the model for application in other subject areas under the umbrella of the university’s ‘Access To’ initiative, comprising the following elements:

Engagement Approach

‘Access To’ has maintained the key approach of the ACES project - to build ambition, enable access and support the achievement of participants, whilst also engaging with parents and carers. The model integrates tutor, pastoral and peer support over a sustained period to meet the needs of the individual learner.

Tutor Support

Engaging with tutorial-sized groups, academic tutors work closely with pupils, typical of work undertaken by undergraduate students. Tutors develop a mentoring relationship with

participants, providing them with the support and encouragement they need. Through this process academic staff have routinely observed positive change in the pupils.

Pastoral Support

School pupils benefit from the pastoral support provided by academic tutors and professional support staff, with opportunities to engage in one-to-one discussions. Course entry routes are explored and pupils are supported to develop the skills required to make a successful transition to university.

Student Support

Appointed ‘Student Ambassadors’ bring enthusiasm and first hand perspectives of undergraduate study to the programme, acting as an invaluable peer mentor and critical friend. In its most recent iteration, the ACES programme was able to provide the first opportunity to engage a previous ACES participant as a Student Ambassador. This created a powerful dynamic whereby the transitioning pupil is involved in shaping the development of the programme and supporting the next generation of ACES pupils.

Partnerships

The ACES project has enabled the development of collaborative partnerships with target schools in Aberdeen City. This has led to new opportunities to engage with educational providers and initiatives within the region. For example, the university is making a significant contribution to the ‘Aberdeen Guarantees’ initiative, a citywide partnership commitment to provide all young people between 14-25 year olds with opportunities to participate in learning, training and work. The engagement model is also being rolled out to Aberdeenshire.

In terms of partnerships, the ACES programme has also strengthened the university’s links with the ASPIRENorth Schools for Higher Education Programme (SHEP) programme.⁸ Staff across both organisations work collaboratively with respect to recruiting ACES participants and providing additional opportunities for ASPIRENorth cohorts to encourage young people to make positive and informed decisions about their post-school educational choices, and to engage with

creative education.

Governmental Widening Access targets embrace a breadth of subject areas, and a number are reflected within RGU's subject portfolio. As with Architecture, the workshop programmes for other subjects offer a blend of practical subject focused sessions delivered by the academic departments, and support sessions delivered by the Study Skills & Access Unit. The initiative is coordinated by the University's 'Wider Access and Outreach Team', based within the 'Study Skills and Access Unit', and operating under the banner of 'ACCESS RGU'. This team delivers outreach activities with schools and communities, coordinates on-campus learning opportunities for prospective students and provides advice and guidance for applicants and enrolling students. The programme of activities is committed to delivering the strategic obligation to extend access to learning and enable talented individuals from under-represented groups, particularly those from deprived areas, to achieve their ambitions through higher education, whatever their circumstances. Consistent with this the 'ACES' initiative presented an opportunity to strengthen links with a number of schools within the region, and to extend outreach activity to demographic groups for whom access to Architecture has not hitherto been regarded as a viable option within resource constraints.

All of the University's widening access programmes are designed to help students make informed decisions about the possibility of a university career and prepare them for tertiary level study, whether at college or university, and include activities such as:

- Subject focused study
- Practical workshops and project experience
- UCAS Application and Personal Statement support
- Exam preparation and revision techniques (where appropriate)
- Interview & portfolio preparation where appropriate)
- Working alongside current RGU students

The ACES programme runs weekly in after-school hours from October to December, and the cost of consumables, transport, and any incidental expenditure, is met by the

University. In return for their commitment, participating students can expect an extensive range of benefits including:

- Access to state of the art learning and teaching facilities
- Increased subject knowledge in Architecture and Art & Design
- Support to develop transferable skills such as problem solving, teamwork, communication, presentation, independent study
- Introduction to the university environment & student life
- Advice & support to make informed decisions about their future
- Advice on careers, pathways and progression
- Support with applications to degree-level study in Architecture and Art & Design
- Access to the library and online learning resources via RGU's 'Associate Student' Scheme
- A guaranteed invitation to RGU selection visits if they complete the course

In accordance with the broader social objectives of the Scottish Government, students must meet at least one of the following criteria in order to take part:

- Attend one of a list of targeted schools as agreed in partnership with the Local Authority
- Have spent time as a 'Looked After Child' or 'Looked After and Accommodated Child'
- Be based in Aberdeen City, living permanently in an area identified as most deprived (referred to as MD20 / MD40 or quintiles 1 & 2 through the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD))
- Be in receipt of an Educational Maintenance Allowance

In addition students must also:

- Be prepared to make a regular out-of-school hours commitment to the programme
- Be able to demonstrate a genuine interest in the subject area and show potential to progress onto degree level study either via a college articulation route or by direct entry to the university.

It is of note that although the entire initiative is politically motivated and may be critiqued for pandering to a particular social stereotype, experience has demonstrated that students are typically less wealthy and have experienced

less access to a breadth of cultural experience than those of the middle-class demography historically found in Architecture and Art and Design cohorts.

Subject Level Response: Architecture, Art & Design (ACES)

In 2012, a programme was conceived by the Scott Sutherland School of Architecture & Built Environment in collaboration with Gray's School of Art & Design, the primary purpose of which is to provide students with an opportunity to develop their creative ideas with support from architecture, and art and design tutors. This programme has subsequently evolved in response to staff and student experiences. Fundamental to this is the development of a series of activities and events that enable the building of relationships with participants, and which give insight to, and build understanding of architecture over an elongated period. By participating in practical workshops and projects students also develop creative skills and techniques and explore their individual potential. Support and guidance is also provided with respect to study opportunities, career advice and application processes.

By working in close proximity with students over an academic year, it becomes possible to observe them in ways that the conventional application process could never facilitate. Unsurprisingly, therefore, it also reveals attributes and qualities within individuals that would otherwise remain invisible or latent, whether through the lack of a process to expose them, or through the inhibitions of the individual. In this sense, the programme performs a mutual benefit; to the student as a means of testing opportunity, and to the University as a kind of extended interview process and observation of skills, motivation, and propensity to learn. Returning to the wider challenges of the profession, and the distance travelled by much in architecture education since the 1958 Oxford Conference, the project has thus begun to pose wider questions about criteria for entry to the system.

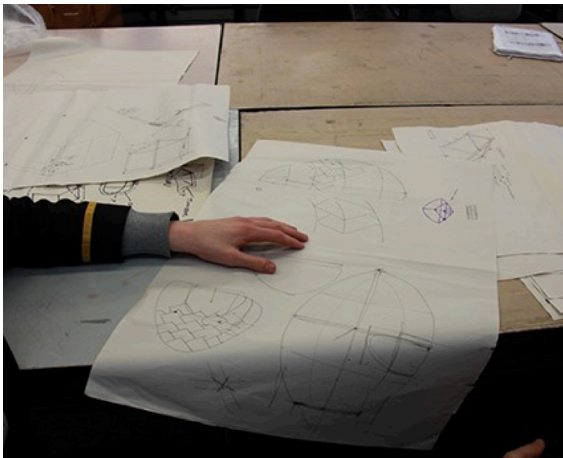
The Projects

Between June 2012 and June 2013, Architecture and Art & Design staff, in conjunction with the Study Skills and Access Unit, organised and delivered 28 high quality

design sessions with school pupils. The programme exposed students to a broad range of learning experiences and environments both on and off campus. As students generally had no prior familial contact with higher education, or with the architecture profession, methods were developed to introduce them to University. Aberdeen Art Gallery was chosen for a launch event on neutral, and perhaps familiar, ground. This proved particularly effective as both a stimulating 'ice-breaker' event and in introducing the group to notions of critical thinking, peer review and collaborative group work.

Students were given packs containing a sketchbook amongst other things, and were encouraged to reflect on what they saw. This was the first time that many of the pupils had met each other and indeed for some it was their first visit to the Art Gallery. They were invited to view specific paintings, sculpture and artefacts and then discuss what they thought of them in a 'cool wall' scenario in open forum with the staff and fellow peers. This engaged them in the formation of judgments and articulation of opinion. This was purely intuitive at first, i.e. whether something is 'cool' or not, but gradually developed in subsequent projects into a more sophisticated form of dialogue. As such it also served as a process that embraces both the acquisition of language, skills in interpretation, and the need to overcome the reticence that comes with assumed ignorance.

The second stage invited participants into the Schools' end of year shows to view and experience the work of graduating students. Engagement with the degree show workshop enabled the pupils to interact with existing students and gain an understanding of the learner journey involved in degree-level study. Subsequently, students were introduced to the university environment through a series of weekly meetings shared between architecture and art and design students, through which a series of simple projects were collaboratively developed. These projects also served to introduce students to the diversity of art and design cultures. In conjunction with these design-led workshops the students attended a series of sessions introducing library-based research tools and the University's virtual learning environment, this preparing them for subsequent research and project work, supported by tutor led lectures, seminars and

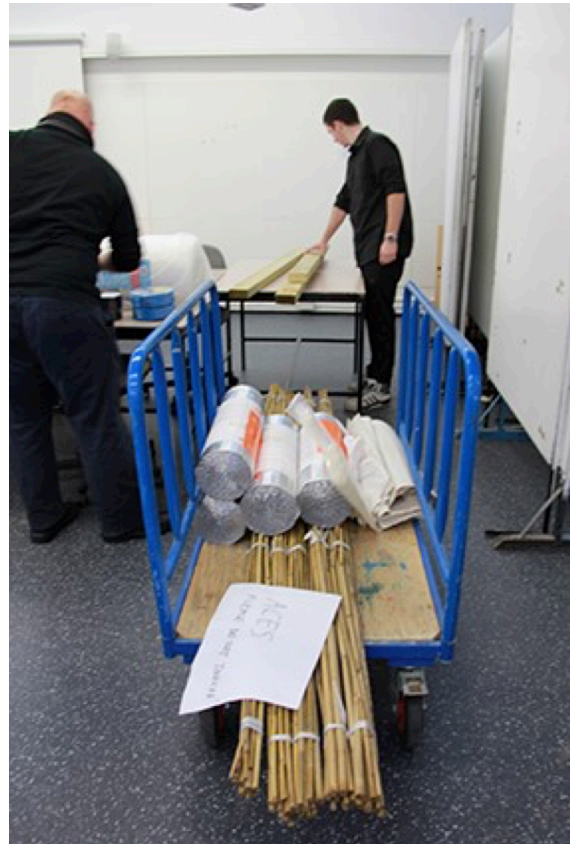


Figures 1 & 2: Early stages of spatial design and modelling (David McClean).

workshops. Participants actively engaged in projects themed around topical issues of habitat, disaster relief and recycling. Support took the form of tutorial discussion and assistance with a reflective evaluation of individual learning journeys, as well as pastoral care and general learning support.

The main block of teaching focused on the skills associated with design and the act of designing. This involved the creation of an architectural space with an associated activity through the construction of two full-size spaces using over 200 cardboard boxes (supplied through private sponsorship). The students were then invited to draw and record the process as it evolved utilising a variety of mediums, and to imagine what purpose the spaces might serve and who might inhabit them. This mix of creative collaboration and hands-on activity provided for a very successful session.

The final session separated the students into subject-related groups to undertake a specific activity. The architecture students were invited to make a full-scale disaster relief shelter in response to a scenario that placed participants



Figures 3 & 4: Design of emergency shelter (David McClean).

in the midst of a natural disaster that demanded the rapid design and construction of a shelter for two people. This vehicle set up discussions relating to the environment and climatic change, and an introduction to issues of human need, protection from the environment, and aspects of sustainability in architecture. The design phase of the project, which made available a narrow selection of materials with which to work, required students to work quickly and intuitively in order to create a suitable functional result. Hence, the students were introduced to quick modelling and sketching as well as communal decision-making.

To conclude the programme, the achievements of the cohort were celebrated through a final



Figures 5 & 6: Construction of final design (David McClean).

public exhibition held to showcase their work. The event attracted a wide audience including the participants and their families, secondary teachers, University staff, and representation from the local authority and ASPIRENorth. The work was subsequently exhibited in the public domain using a city centre venue that acts as a focal point for the cultural sector of the city.

Local Project Outcomes

Evaluation of the programme demonstrated the positive influence that it had on participants and in reinforcing their developing aspirations to HE study. Student responses were extremely positive, reporting that they had:

- Developed confidence as learners
- Benefited from working with students from other schools
- Developed an understanding of their personal capacity to become a successful university student
- Become informed about the study routes available within creative areas, and which ones suite their individual skills, attributes and aspirations.

Over 90% of the students who responded regarded participation in ACES as having encouraged them to apply to university, evidence that the programme achieved its aim of encouraging disadvantaged students from target schools to apply to degree courses. One of the most valuable outcomes of the process has been the ability to enter into extended conversations about the subject of architecture, and the process of preparing an application for study. The relevance of portfolios and personal statements are central points of discussion, and allow for a developed understanding of what is valued by the university within this process.

The success of the project to date is largely attributable to the contribution of the architecture ‘Student Ambassadors’, who offered the opportunity for important incidental discussions with participants, and a level of openness that made possible through similarities in age. This has been key to the development of understanding of the student experience, and in this respect it is the Ambassadors who have taken a lead within the project.

Curriculum for Excellence: Change in Scottish Secondary Education

An important context for Curriculum for Excellence is the Scottish Government’s Skills Investment Plan for the Creative Industries,⁹ published in in 2015 in recognition of their importance at a macro-economic level. Yet, despite such an initiative, it would appear that the educational underpinning of the creative industries is experiencing some significant challenges.

Across the UK there is evidence of a decline in the uptake of Art and Design as a secondary subject and, since the introduction of Curriculum for Excellence in Scotland, there is much anecdotal evidence that this picture is similarly reflected north of the border. Such a situation presents considerable vulnerabilities for courses such as Architecture at tertiary level, causing institutions to consider initiatives that could help promote and support the secondary visual arts curriculum.

The Arts and the Region

The national picture is reflected regionally, and indeed may be exacerbated by the local economic and educational context. Dominated

by the oil and gas industry for the past 40 years, the economic context of Aberdeen is highly specific. Arguably, it has created an environment that is perceived to value business and technology above the arts, and in which the opportunities presented by these areas are both tangible and understood. It is a difficult context for the arts, which has to confront the challenge of developing understanding of study and career opportunities, and of students, parents, and guidance teachers making connections between secondary subject choice and career potential outside of the STEM subjects. There would appear to be a genuine challenge in convincingly describing what forms employment takes in the arts, and to paint compelling pictures for students and parents.

A Dual Role for the ACES model?

This wider context implies that the need to inform students and parents of opportunities within the arts, is greater than simply applying to the MD20 / MD40 groupings. Indeed it suggests that the model developed for the ACES programme may well have an application more generally in supporting the pathway into architecture education. As a result, initial explorations have begun into how the Scott Sutherland School might work in partnership with the secondary sector in supporting elements of Curriculum for Excellence, and in doing so, building relationships with schools, students and teachers that it is hoped will provide mutual benefit in the medium to longer term.

Broader Conclusions

Robert Gordon University's experience in delivering the ACES project over a number of years has shown that to be effective, engagement activity with young people, schools and other partners has to be ongoing and sustained over a long period. While undoubtedly an expensive, resource intensive approach, it nevertheless provokes more fundamental questions about entry to architecture.

Having now run the project over a 4 year period, the school has students on its architecture course that have entered via the ACES route and who are performing well. Reflecting on the specific experience of the project has caused the team to question the

'traditional' assumptions made within architecture education generally regarding the ways in which applicants are required to demonstrate their eligibility to study the subject. In running the ACES project the staff team have had the opportunity to tutor students whose experience and knowledge of art and its relationship to architecture has been very limited or perhaps even misguided. In this way, staff have had the opportunity to develop a far deeper insight into the individual, their attitudes, aptitudes, and motivations. This has in turn enabled staff to make informed judgements regarding 'potential' that balance evidence of artistic ability alongside the individuals' appetite for learning and personal development. It has also enabled an extended exploration of the individual's motivation to study architecture. It is argued that, to a certain extent, these are more meaningful and valuable insights than those offered through standard application processes, and generate levels of confidence in both the student and the university.

There is no doubt that the initiative has given access to students who would have been excluded and denied the opportunity only a few years ago. Hence the outcomes of the project to some extent challenge the accepted orthodoxy and expectation for entry to architectural education. We are at a time when much contemporary debate questions the range of skills that education should be developing in future professionals, the breadth of abilities that the profession should more overtly value, and the overall composition of the profession.¹⁰ Hence the questions regarding 'entry profile' raised by this project are highly pertinent to the wider community.

In current UK terms, the 'Part 1'¹¹ is commonly celebrated for its qualities as a high quality (indeed unparalleled) broad, generalist education. There are many who complete this but who pursue careers or areas of further study outside architecture. Consequently, there are those who believe that architecture

education and the profession should play more distinct roles and that the current relationship (certainly in the UK) limits learning potential through lack of flexibility and prescription.

At the same time, there is much rhetoric within architecture education about recognising through curriculum design and assessment,

that the profession requires skills in areas such as entrepreneurship, business, and project management. In reality, however, little has changed to enact this. In effect, these debates speak of a breadth, and themselves point to the possibility of making the entry 'gateway' wider to the benefit of the profession and the individual.

As for risks, these are few and may be easily managed. In the UK it is the completion of formal studies and (or incorporating) a professional examination (i.e. the 'Part 3' examination¹²) that controls entry to the profession. In many other countries it is purely completion of a recognised academic qualification. Whatever the construct, the fact remains that control of ultimate entry to the profession remains a distinct and separate issue to that of entry to professional education, especially where only a percentage progress along the linear pathway to professional membership.

It might benefit us all to begin to convert the rhetoric that surrounds architecture education into practice, and begin by considering more laterally the processes that govern entry to architecture education.

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- 11 According to the current system of validation in the UK, 'Part 1' refers to the first 3 years of formal full-time study, this being equivalent to Honours degree level in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland.
- 12 The final examination that allows someone to apply for entry to the UK Register of

Architects held by the Architects Registration Board (ARB), is known as the 'Part 3'.