



Australian
Institute of
Architects

INQUIRY INTO AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY GRADUATES



Senate Education and Employment References Committee

ROYAL AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS

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ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The Royal Australian Institute of Architects (Institute) is the peak body for the architectural profession in Australia. It is an independent, national member organisation with more than 13,500 members across Australia and overseas.

The Institute exists to advance the interests of members, support professional standards and contemporary practice, and advocate the value of architects and architecture to the sustainable growth of our communities, economy and culture.

The Institute actively works to maintain and improve the quality of our built environment by promoting better, responsible and environmental design.

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- + At the time of this submission the National President is David Wagner FRAIA.
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The Royal Australian Institute of Architects recognises the unceded sovereign lands and rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples of these lands and waters.

This recognition generates acknowledgement and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Countries, Cultures and Communities, and their ways of being, knowing and doing.

Caring for Country practices including architecture and place shaping have existed on this continent since time immemorial.

The Institute recognises a professional commitment to engage and act meaningfully through reciprocal partnership and relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Together we will support and develop the emergence of new possibilities for our shared future.

INQUIRY INTO AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY GRADUATES – SENATE EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT REFERENCES COMMITTEE

1. Introduction

The Australian Institute of Architects welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Education and Employment References Committee inquiry into the rise in the number of Australian university graduates who struggle to find work after graduating.

The Institute is the peak body for the architectural profession in Australia. It represents architects, architecture students, graduates, academics and practices across all states and territories. The Institute's interest in this inquiry is informed by its role in supporting the full professional pipeline: from architectural education, through early career employment and professional experience, to registration and continuing professional development.

This submission has been prepared with input from the Institute's student and emerging practitioner networks, including the Student Organised Network for Architecture (SONA), and the Emerging Architects and Graduates Network (EmAGN).

The Institute considers architecture to be a useful case study for this inquiry. Architecture graduates undertake a long and demanding education pathway, generally involving five years of tertiary study, followed by a period of professional experience and the Architectural Practice Examination before registration. The accredited qualification in Australia is normally the Master of Architecture, with bachelor-level degrees generally forming part of the pathway but not accredited for registration on their own.

The transition from university to employment is not a single moment at graduation. It is a staged pathway involving education, work-integrated learning, early career employment, supervised professional experience, award compliance, mentoring, professional development and registration. In practice, this transition is often fragmented, with graduates required to navigate employment, experience, mentoring and registration across separate systems with limited continuity or clarity.

Architecture graduates represent a strategic national capability, forming part of the workforce needed to deliver housing, climate adaptation, public infrastructure, safer buildings and better places. Architecture education produces graduates with strong public-interest capabilities, but the system does not consistently translate that capability into sustainable early career practice. Early career bottlenecks should therefore be understood as system issues affecting national capability, workforce sustainability and long-term public interest.

The Institute's central submission is that improving graduate employment outcomes in architecture requires a coordinated pipeline approach. Universities, employers, professional bodies, registration boards and government each have a role in ensuring graduates can move into meaningful, fairly paid employment and ultimately registration.

This is a workforce sustainability issue, a professional standards issue and a public-interest issue.

2. Relevance to the terms of reference

The inquiry is examining the rise in Australian university graduates struggling to find work after graduating, including the state of the entry-level job market, the quality of university education, whether graduates are taught the skills employers need, comparable jurisdictions, and the economic, social and psychological effects on graduates.

These matters are highly relevant to architecture and the built environment professions. The Graduate Outcomes Survey shows that graduate employment softened in 2024 as labour market tightness eased. For domestic undergraduates, full-time employment fell from 79.0 per cent in 2023 to 74.0 per cent in 2024. Architecture and built environment graduates appear to have been particularly affected, with reported full-time undergraduate employment falling from 78.7 per cent in 2023 to 66.6 per cent in 2024.

These figures are important because they suggest architecture graduates may be entering a softer labour market despite completing a longer and more structured professional pathway than many other disciplines. At the same time, the figures should be interpreted carefully. Architecture employment is affected by wider economic and development conditions, including housing supply, infrastructure investment, planning approval pipelines, procurement practices, interest rates and private-sector confidence. However, the data reinforces the need to examine graduate outcomes in architecture as part of a broader national conversation about employment, productivity and professional capability, and to look beyond headline employment rates to underemployment, insecure work, professional progression, retention and registration outcomes.

3. Recommendations

The Institute recommends the Australian Government:

1. **Recognise architecture and built environment disciplines as part of the national skills pipeline** needed to deliver housing, climate resilience, public infrastructure, safer buildings and better places.
2. **Support a national transition-to-practice framework** for architecture students and graduates, developed with universities, employers, professional bodies, registration boards and student and graduate representatives, with minimum expectations for supervision, breadth of experience, workplace information and access to mentoring.
3. **Improve access to paid, structured work-integrated learning and early professional experience**, including through a nationally consistent approach to subsidised placements, particularly for students from regional and low-income backgrounds, First Nations students, other under-represented groups, and for small and medium practices that may lack the capacity to host and supervise students without support. This should include consideration of targeted government incentives or subsidies for employers of students and graduates, recognising the cost of supervision and training, and supporting increased employment opportunities across the sector.

4. **Strengthen practice-readiness within architectural education** without reducing the central importance of design excellence, critical thinking, sustainability, ethics, cultural capability and public-interest design, including improved exposure to practical systems, documentation, and professional workflows to support more efficient transition into practice.
5. **Improve national data collection on architecture graduate outcomes**, including underemployment, unpaid work, pay, classification, unpaid overtime, registration progression, time to registration, attrition, regional impacts and equity of access.
6. **Support early career mentoring, supervision and professional development**, including structured support mechanisms that assist both graduates and employers to navigate the transition from study to employment and registration.
7. **Promote fair employment practices in early career architecture**, including clear guidance on the Architects Award, relevant workplace law, reasonable hours, paid work experience and appropriate classification of students and graduates.
8. **Examine the cumulative financial burden of long professional pathways**, including student debt, software and equipment costs, placement-related costs, registration costs and the costs associated with continuing professional development.
9. **Consider graduate employment outcomes in the context of procurement and market settings**, recognising that unstable project pipelines, lowest-cost procurement models, unrealistic timeframes and under-scoped services reduce the capacity of practices to employ, supervise and train graduates.

Procurement reform should support quality-based selection, fair fees, realistic programs and continuity of design input, recognising the important role of small and medium practices in the professional pipeline.

4. Architecture as a long professional pathway

Architecture is a regulated profession. The most common pathway to registration in Australia involves completing an accredited qualification, undertaking relevant professional experience, successfully completing the Architectural Practice Examination, and then applying for registration with the relevant state or territory registration board under the applicable legislative framework.

This pathway is important because architects carry public responsibilities. They contribute to the quality, safety, sustainability, accessibility and long-term value of the built environment. Their work affects housing, health, education, aged care, cultural infrastructure, climate resilience, disaster recovery, heritage, urban design and community wellbeing.

However, the length and complexity of the pathway also create points of vulnerability for students and graduates. These include:

- the financial burden of extended study, including tuition costs, student debt and additional expenses such as software, equipment, printing, model-making and travel;
- uneven access to paid work experience;

- the need to balance study, work and financial pressures;
- variation in exposure to practice realities during university;
- uncertainty about employment pathways after graduation;
- early career pay and workload pressures;
- inconsistent supervision and mentoring;
- barriers to logging experience required for registration;
- the cost and complexity of progressing through registration; and
- the psychological impact of underemployment, rejection or insecure work after a long period of study.

These are structural pressures within a long professional pathway. Addressing them requires a coordinated transition-to-practice approach across education, employment, professional regulation and government policy.

5. The entry-level job market for architecture graduates

The entry-level market for architecture graduates is closely tied to the health of the broader building and development sector. When project pipelines are strong and practices have confidence in future workload, there is greater capacity to employ, supervise and train students and graduates. When markets soften, early career roles often become more limited or insecure.

Architecture practices are affected by procurement settings. Public and private procurement that prioritises lowest fees, compressed timeframes, risk transfer and under-scoped services can prevent practices from investing in graduate development. Conversely, procurement that values design quality, realistic programs, fair risk allocation and continuity of design teams supports better professional development and more sustainable employment.

For this reason, graduate employment outcomes should not be viewed only as a question of whether individual graduates are “work ready”. The demand side matters. Practices need a stable and viable operating environment to employ, supervise and develop graduates.

A graduate employment strategy that focuses only on individual employability risks overlooking the market conditions that determine whether practices can create meaningful entry-level roles. Recent building quality and regulatory reforms in some jurisdictions have also increased expectations around documentation, coordination and professional accountability. These reforms reinforce the value of architectural expertise, but they also require sufficient time and resourcing within practice. Where procurement settings do not support that level of effort, both training capacity and project quality can be undermined.

The Institute submits that graduate employment policy should therefore be connected to wider national objectives, including housing delivery, infrastructure investment, design quality, climate adaptation, building safety and construction sector productivity.

6. Quality of university education and practice readiness

Australian architectural education has significant strengths. It develops design thinking, spatial intelligence, creativity, critical inquiry, environmental awareness, cultural understanding, collaboration and complex problem-solving. These capabilities are essential to the future of the profession and should not be diminished.

Greater practice readiness would also improve efficiency in practice, reducing the time required for on-the-job training and enabling both graduates and practices to operate more productively.

Preliminary student feedback received by the Institute also suggests students continue to value architectural education highly, while also calling for stronger practical exposure, clearer links to day-to-day practice and more structured pathways into employment.

There is a continuing need to strengthen the transition between academic learning and professional practice. Students and graduates commonly need more consistent exposure to:

- project delivery and documentation;
- construction processes and site experience;
- procurement and contracts;
- consultant coordination;
- regulatory systems, planning and building approvals;
- business and practice management, including project economics, fees, scope, resourcing and the relationship between commercial settings, workloads and professional practice;
- professional ethics and client relationships;
- First Nations engagement and designing with Country;
- climate resilience, adaptation and whole-of-life carbon;
- digital practice, AI and emerging technologies;
- employment rights, the Architects Award, timesheets and overtime;
- communication, negotiation and professional judgement; and
- thoroughness in documentation, coordination and professional output appropriate to real-world project delivery.

The Institute recommends that practice-readiness be strengthened in a way that complements, rather than narrows, architectural education. The objective is not to turn universities into technical training providers, but to ensure graduates leave university with a clearer understanding of the professional, ethical, commercial, regulatory and collaborative environment in which architecture is practised. Practice-readiness should be understood as the integration of design capability, professional judgement, ethical responsibility and practical knowledge, not as a retreat from design excellence or critical inquiry.

This includes preparing graduates to work with an appropriate level of rigour and thoroughness expected in professional practice, where accuracy and completeness directly affect project outcomes, compliance and risk.

7. Work-integrated learning and paid experience

Work-integrated learning and early professional experience are critical to improving graduate outcomes. Students who have access to meaningful, paid and structured experience are more likely to understand the profession, build confidence, develop networks and transition into employment.

However, access to this experience is uneven. Opportunities are often concentrated in metropolitan areas and can be shaped by informal networks and prior experience expectations, disadvantaging students without established industry connections. These barriers can be compounded for students from under-represented backgrounds, including First Nations students, culturally and linguistically diverse students, and students with disability or neurodivergence. These challenges are often amplified where factors such as low income, regional location or being the first in family to attend university intersect. Preliminary student feedback also suggests many students are combining study with paid work outside architecture while still facing challenges securing relevant professional experience.

The Institute recommends greater support for structured, paid work-integrated learning in architecture and built environment disciplines, including nationally consistent subsidised placement models. This would improve access to meaningful experience, reduce inequity in early career pathways, and strengthen the professional pipeline. A modest public investment in subsidised placements would recognise that training requires time, supervision and resourcing, and could reduce attrition while improving the return on existing investment in architectural education.

This approach could be complemented by targeted incentives for employers, recognising that architectural practices carry a significant share of the cost of training and supervision. Structured, modest subsidies—similar to apprenticeship models in other sectors—could support increased graduate employment and strengthen the transition from education to practice.

This could include:

- clearer national guidance on what constitutes appropriate student work experience;
- targeted support for small and medium practices to host students and graduates in supervised paid roles;
- regional placement support;
- stronger links between universities, practices and professional bodies;
- guidance on award compliance and fair employment; and
- mechanisms to ensure placements are educational, supervised and paid where work is performed.

The Architects Award covers architecture students, architecture graduates and registered architects. This should be clearly understood by universities, students and employers. Employment compliance is not separate from graduate outcomes; it is part of a healthy transition into professional life.

8. Early career pay, workload and wellbeing

The inquiry's terms of reference expressly include the economic, social and psychological effects of graduate employment challenges. These issues are highly relevant to architecture.

Architecture students and graduates often invest many years in education before reaching registration. Where graduates then encounter insecure employment, limited entry-level roles, low pay, unpaid overtime or unclear career progression, the impacts can be significant. These pressures may contribute to attrition from the profession, reduced diversity and diminished future capability.

The pressures associated with unpaid labour and long-hours culture can begin before graduation, including through portfolio development, competitions and informal expectations around self-directed preparation for employment. The first two to five years after graduation are a critical retention period, when many graduates assess whether architecture is financially, professionally and personally sustainable as a long-term career.

The Institute considers fair early career employment to be essential to the long-term health of the profession. This includes:

- appropriate award classification;
- payment for work performed;
- transparent expectations about hours;
- active supervision and mentoring;
- safe workplace cultures;
- realistic workloads;
- support for professional development and registration; and
- clear communication about career progression.

This is not only a matter of individual fairness; it is a workforce sustainability issue for a regulated profession with public responsibilities. A profession that cannot retain and develop its graduates will be less able to meet Australia's future built environment challenges.

9. Registration and professional experience

The pathway to registration is a defining feature of architectural careers. The period between graduation and registration should be understood as a critical phase of professional formation.

Graduates need access to appropriate experience across the competencies required for registration. Yet not all early career roles provide exposure to the breadth of experience

required. Some graduates may spend extended periods in narrow project roles, documentation support, visualisation, competitions or limited task-based work without adequate breadth of supervised experience. This can create uneven progression toward registration, even where graduates are employed and contributing meaningfully within practice.

The Institute recommends stronger alignment between:

- university education;
- graduate employment;
- the National Standard of Competency for Architects;
- professional experience requirements;
- the Architectural Practice Examination; and
- workplace mentoring and supervision.

This does not require a rigid or uniform pathway. Architecture practices are diverse, and graduates will develop through different project types and contexts. However, clearer expectations and better support would help graduates understand what experience they need and help employers provide more structured development so that progression to registration is more consistent and transparent. It would also assist practices, particularly small and medium practices, to understand how everyday project work can be used to support graduates' progression toward registration.

10. Comparable jurisdictions and international context

The challenges facing architecture students and graduates are not unique to Australia. Comparable jurisdictions are also grappling with the cost of education, unpaid or insecure early career work, graduate wellbeing, professional registration pathways, changing technology and the need to retain diverse talent.

The Institute encourages the Committee to consider architecture as part of the international built environment skills pipeline. Australia's capacity to deliver housing, public infrastructure, resilient communities and climate-responsive places depends on sustaining professional capability across generations.

International comparisons should examine not only graduate employment rates, but also:

- the cost and length of architectural education;
- access to paid experience;
- registration requirements;
- the role of professional bodies;
- public procurement settings;
- graduate pay and working conditions;
- retention and attrition;
- equity of access to the profession.

The Institute cautions against international comparisons that focus only on headline graduate employment rates without considering the regulatory, workplace and financial settings that shape professional formation.

11. Data gaps

There is a need for better architecture-specific data on graduate outcomes. Existing graduate outcome data is useful but does not provide a full picture of the transition into professional practice.

The Institute recommends improved data collection on:

- full-time employment, part-time employment and underemployment;
- employment inside and outside architecture;
- pay and classification;
- unpaid overtime and hours worked;
- access to professional experience;
- progress toward registration;
- time from graduation to registration;
- attrition from architecture;
- regional and remote graduate outcomes;
- the experiences of international, culturally and linguistically diverse students and graduates; and
- broader equity impacts, including gender, cultural background, disability, neurodivergence and socio-economic status.

Better data would assist government, universities, employers, registration boards and professional bodies to design targeted interventions and to identify whether current systems are equitably converting educational achievement into professional opportunity. It would also help distinguish between graduates who are technically employed and graduates who are meaningfully progressing toward professional practice and registration. As national tertiary reporting frameworks continue to evolve, the Institute considers that architecture graduate outcomes, including underemployment, pay and progression to registration, should be captured more clearly in national reporting on higher education outcomes.

12. The public-interest case for supporting architecture graduates

Architecture graduates are not only private participants in the labour market. They are part of the future professional workforce needed to deliver national priorities.

Australia faces significant challenges in housing supply, urban growth, climate adaptation, disaster resilience and public infrastructure delivery. Architects have a direct role in addressing these challenges through design quality, technical skill, ethical practice and public-interest decision-making.

Failure to support architecture students and graduates risks weakening the professional pipeline at a time when Australia needs stronger built environment capability.

The consequences would not be confined to individual graduates or individual practices. They would affect Australia's capacity to plan, design and deliver the homes, communities and public infrastructure required for the decades ahead. The Institute submits that graduate employment policy should recognise architecture and built environment disciplines as strategically important to Australia's future.

13. Implementation and shared responsibility

The transition from university to practice cannot be improved by one institution acting alone. Effective reform requires action by government, universities, employers, professional bodies and registration authorities, each with clearly understood responsibilities. Government can recognise architecture as part of the national skills pipeline, improve data collection and support structured paid placements. Universities can strengthen curriculum-to-practice alignment and improve access to fair and relevant work experience. Employers can provide paid, supervised and award-compliant early career roles, with clear pathways for development and registration. Professional bodies and registration authorities can support the pipeline through guidance, mentoring structures, transition-to-practice leadership and clearer information about professional progression.

14. Conclusion

The Institute supports the objectives of this inquiry and encourages the Committee to consider graduate employment as a shared responsibility across education, employment, professional regulation and government policy.

For architecture, the transition from university to work is complex and extended. It requires more than improved employability skills. It requires a coordinated pathway from education to practice and registration, supported by fair employment, structured experience, mentoring, viable practice settings and better data.

The Institute also supports consideration of targeted employer incentives to support the employment and supervision of architectural students and graduates. Recognising and partially offsetting the cost of graduate supervision and training would help expand employment opportunities—particularly in small and medium practices—and strengthen the overall professional pipeline.

The Institute 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 and graduate employment.

Supporting architecture graduates is not only a matter of graduate employment. It is an investment in Australia's future design capability, construction productivity, housing outcomes, climate resilience and public value.

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