

Off course

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With the continuing drive for cost efficiencies in university teaching, specialist conservation training is under increasing pressure ? affecting our ability to conserve our built heritage.

UK higher education is becoming increasingly neoliberal in nature, with an overt reduction in government spending. The marketisation of the sector favours deregulation and prompts fundamental questions about the purpose of universities and their civic and societal roles.

In terms of building conservation, adequate and appropriate university education is vital to ensure that students fully master the subject. Our ability to protect our historic built environment may be damaged by a lack of higher-level critical analysis and application of knowledge required to cope with the inherent complexity of projects.

Conducting work on historic buildings has arguably not always been recognised as a specialist discipline in construction. In the past, materials and technologies for repair and construction were similar, so whether people were carrying out one or the other, the results were comparable.

This situation arguably changed with innovation in materials and architectural technologies, most notably in a series of distinct waves of mass housing that took place after the war with the development of low-rise buildings in 1923?42 and 1944?55, and high-rises in the 1960s and 1970s. The technologies deployed signalled a marked divergence from traditional practices.

Given this growing divergence, the [Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings](#) (SPAB) established a scholarship programme in 1930 to offer experiential postgraduate education in conservative repair to qualified architects, and to encourage an understanding of philosophical approaches and respect for traditional craft and materials.

The pioneering programme ? the first specialist conservation course in the world ? was initially limited in scale, with only 1 student a year. The scholarship was soon expanded to up to 4 students a year, and participation widened to building surveyors and engineers to acknowledge the importance of all 3 professions in overseeing conservation projects.

The first university postgraduate programme offering specialist education in the field came some time later in 1967, in the form of an MA at the University of Manchester. This was followed by Edinburgh College of Art in 1968, with other courses being developed at traditional ? ancient or redbrick ? universities and newer plate-glass universities as well as the polytechnics, now classified as the 1992 universities, over the next few decades.

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The establishment of these programmes responded to the following issues:

- the growing recognition of and value attached to historic buildings, and the subsequent need for specialist intervention and thus education;
- increasing professional complexity and diversity as the conservation sector developed and matured;
- the perceived deficiencies in both undergraduate and postgraduate training in architecture and surveying, with reduced coverage of traditional materials and technology and a bias in syllabuses towards modern construction methods.

The core content of the postgraduate programmes was similar, sharing the [Council on Training in Architectural Conservation](#) (COTAC) framework, but the specifics differed according to the specialisms of the programme directors, who were largely practitioners rather than academics. Importantly, the nature of the programmes also reflected the professional accrediting institutions, including [RICS](#) and the [Institute of Historic Building Conservation](#) (IHBC).

Although slowly at first, professional accreditation for these programmes began to gain traction, reflecting the diversity of specialisms offered, with building surveying being accredited by RICS, architecture by the [Royal Institute of British Architects](#) and the [Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland](#), planning by the [Royal Town Planning Institute](#), construction management by the [Chartered Institute of Building](#), and architectural archaeology by the [Institute for Archaeologists](#). Today, the IHBC also accredits numerous programmes alongside these institutions, reflecting its increasing recognition across built environment professions.

Today's postgraduate programmes educate individuals who wish to enter the conservation sector, as well as those it already employs who want to enhance their personal competency and skills, thereby widening and supporting the specialist services they can offer clients. Generally, current syllabus design reflects core conservation skills identified by COTAC, and progressive societal, environmental and technological issues.

Core skills will always be required, although programmes that fail to respond to societal, environmental and technological trends will struggle to provide their graduates with employment opportunities in our changing world. More recently, courses have evolved to incorporate teaching on sustainability, climate change and building resilience, energy in buildings and disruptive digital technologies, reflecting professional practice needs and sector-wide demand.

Courses at risk

There are currently no building conservation undergraduate degrees in the UK. However, modules on many programmes – mainly but not exclusively those in building surveying and architecture – cover conservation of historic buildings. Postgraduates are served by around 20 programmes, each of which recruit between 10 and 20 full-time students a year, but would logically aspire to enrol more.

These programmes are offered to those with first degrees both in the built environment and in other disciplines – that is, non-cognate learners – and are also an accepted route into the sector for those without a traditional academic background, as the courses are designed to

take a potential lack of preceding technical education into account.

However, with the current emphasis on financial efficiency at all levels, programmes with low cohort numbers are vulnerable to closure, meaning that the provision is in a state of flux, potentially putting the conservation sector, and by extension building surveying, at risk.

Efficiency can be evaluated by looking at staff?student ratios and the relative cost of delivering bespoke modules. Universities establish notional minimum cohort sizes of around 20 full-time-equivalent learners in their strategic planning, by which they measure financial viability, although this number can vary between institutions. Smaller programmes therefore not only represent a financial loss but also an opportunity cost, as highly qualified academic staff might be better employed writing research grant proposals, teaching on other programmes, or undertaking administrative tasks in an increasingly bureaucratic university system.

Efficiency can also be judged by evaluating the relative numbers of common modules ? that is, those that are taken across multiple programmes, such as procurement and contracts for architects, construction managers and quantity surveyors ? and specialised or bespoke modules available only to limited numbers of conservation students ? such as building conservation philosophy. The higher the number of common modules students take, the more profitable they are; however, this can result in a more generic educational offering, with many construction professional disciplines taking the same subjects. This reduces the opportunity for learners to specialise in conservation.

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Student fees are also critical to this equation: postgraduate programmes typically cost each domestic student around ?10,000 a year, but some MBAs are now charging ?30,000, so it would be logical to assume that fees for conservation degrees will also rise. The benefit of taking an MSc in conservation is hindered by relatively low graduate wages for those entering the profession. The return on investment is likely not compelling, and this potentially dissuades many from taking such courses.

It could, however, be argued that the cost inefficiencies in postgraduate programmes do not rest with the programmes themselves but the administrative overheads of the university. Indeed, Benjamin Ginsberg argued in *The Fall of the Faculty* that the true inefficiencies are associated with central administration and university running costs. In this context, it becomes increasingly difficult for programmes to break even, with funding directed to frontline teaching and learning surprisingly low at [less than 50% of income generated](#) .

Universities thus seek to achieve cost efficiencies by a combination of means:

- increasing student numbers;
- increasing fees;
- decreasing staffing numbers and increasing staff?student ratios; and
- reducing the number of bespoke modules.

Surveying specialisms suffer

While certain academic institutions may win or lose as programmes come and go, a decline in certain accredited programmes could have ramifications for the number of suitably qualified graduates entering the specialised branches of conservation. For example, building conservation programmes closely aligned to building surveying have fallen significantly in number, with several prominent universities all closing their courses to new entrants in the past couple of years.

Learners may then be redirected towards alternative postgraduate programmes, but this does not bode well for the building surveying profession, which already requires specialist syllabus content on professional practice requirements such as pathology, survey and maintenance. Neither does it help those wishing to use such courses as a route into building surveying or conservation.

Specialism is core to professional education: specific, practical conservation skills are fundamental for appropriate and well-considered work on historic buildings

Undergraduate building surveying programmes also appear vulnerable, given the relatively small size of cohorts compared to those for quantity surveying, architecture and civil engineering courses. Clearly, not all institutions aim to reduce specialist provision for small undergraduate or postgraduate groups, but they do all require cross-subsidy from programmes with larger student intakes.

Universities in the elite Russell Group are generally characterised by good postgraduate recruitment, relatively buoyant research grant income and higher levels of donations by alumni, and are therefore better positioned to subsidise such courses. Conversely, the former polytechnics provide most construction education but are generally more financially vulnerable to lower recruitment numbers and relatively limited research grant income.

Logically, the Russell Group universities can afford to keep offering these small specialist programmes, but as tertiary education becomes increasingly marketised it is not clear how long this will last. Of course, an institution's willingness to support relatively low cohort numbers will depend on several factors, not just finance; for example, a diverse portfolio of courses can enhance other programmes by enriching students' education.

Critical thinking and analytical skills, which form part of all higher education, are important for higher-order practice in any profession, including conservation. Yet specialism is core to professional education: practical conservation skills are fundamental for well-considered, appropriate work on historic buildings.

A reduction in surveying-oriented conservation education may ultimately jeopardise the quality of such work and diminish the prominence of building surveyors in conservation. Building surveyors, and more specifically those professionals accredited in conservation, have worked hard to attain a high degree of respectability in the field, and specialist surveyors command a significant share of the conservation project market in the UK.

If the number of RICS-accredited university conservation programmes continues to decline, educational opportunities may be offered by companies themselves in the form of in-house training and extended CPD offerings; but this will lead to more

fragmented education that lacks the depth and breadth of traditional postgraduate studies, and potentially have negative implications on cost and time.

It seems ironic that, at a time when our traditional and historic buildings face urgent environmental challenges, we reduce the educational offering that supports our understanding of the performance of existing architectural form and fabric. Undoubtedly our traditional and historic buildings ? and ultimately society ? will be poorer for it.

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Further information

- This feature is taken from the RICS [Built Environment Journal](#) (November/December 2019)
- Related categories include: [Conservation and restoration](#) ; [Heritage issues](#)