



EDITORIAL

Architecture's key role in winning hearts and minds (and pockets) of students Gail Taylor reports exclusively for WAN.

As student becomes customer and globalisation fuels competition between universities, architects have an increasingly important role to play in attracting the best applicants and teachers from home and overseas. Estates Directors from two leading institutions share their insights...

At the end of 2014, an article in the UK's *Telegraph* newspaper referred to a survey carried out by RIBA's Higher Education Design Quality Forum (HEDQF). The survey had revealed that over a third of undergraduates studying in the UK had been put off applying to a higher education institution because of the quality of its buildings.

This striking statistic prompted us to contact those involved to find out more. Why had student expectations of their physical environment apparently increased so sharply in recent times - were we so fussy in the 70s? What were they looking for, and what were good examples of particularly successful campuses, both at home and overseas?

First, we spoke to Julian Robinson, instigator of the survey, the findings of which were published in a report entitled *Estates Matter!* Julian is also Deputy Chair of HEDQF, and Director of Estates at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).

When asked if growing expectations were set to get even higher, he tells us, "Yes. The HE market is now very competitive both nationally and internationally. As students are now the main funders of HE in [most of] the UK [to the tune of up to £9,000 per year in fees since 2012], they want to feel that they matter to their university, and the quality of buildings and campuses is an outward expression of how institutions value their students and staff.

"All universities are trying to differentiate themselves, and one way of doing this is to invest in individual, memorable and high quality buildings."

We then asked Ian Caldwell, contributor to *Estates Matter!*, Chair of HEDQF, and Director of Estates and Facilities at King's College London, what he thought students were looking for?

"Obviously modern facilities that support teaching, learning and creative thought, in which they will enjoy working. The key aim of high-quality buildings is to attract and retain the best students and staff and to enable them to perform at their highest level. The introduction of student fees has reinforced this importance.

"I also believe universities should look at other sectors such as the best of retail, technology, cultural facilities and office designs, and bring ideas in from those. This is one of the advantages of architectural competitions, and may be why they are often used. It's also important to involve students in the design of their facilities; they are more in touch with modern ideas than many of us are."

Creating this sense of ownership was demonstrated at King's College's new £20 million project, The Quad, at its Strand Campus. Students and staff were invited to comment before final sign-off on Belfast-based Hall McKnight's winning designs.

Going back to the HEDQF survey - which was based on a sample of 1,000 students - when asked what were the most important factors when deciding where to study, 76% ranked campus facilities as either 'quite' or 'very' important, with only 8% saying it was 'not very' or 'not at all' important. It was the fourth most important factor after course, location and reputation.

So, which higher education institutions are getting it right? Let's start with the winner of last year's coveted Stirling Prize, the LSE's striking £24 million Saw Swee Hock Student Centre. We asked Julian what helped to inspire his brief.

"There are many great modernist buildings by Kahn, Stirling, Jacobsen, Lasdun, Spence, Powell and Moya, ABK, etc, which I think must have had an influence when I wrote the Vision Statement at the front of the brief. What I was determined to achieve was a seminal piece of university architecture. I am supremely confident that [our architects] O'Donnell Tuomey have done us proud in this respect."

The *Estates Matter!* Report also includes a link to a 10-minute video documentary taking a whistle stop tour of what HEDQF considers to be other shining examples of inspirational and effective campus design. These include the funky looking Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication (known affectionately as the Rave and designed by FOA) in London's Greenwich Peninsula; Edinburgh Napier University's Craig lockhart

Campus with its iconic lecture hall, nicknamed The Egg; TU Delft's new architecture faculty in the Netherlands (the original building was destroyed by fire in 2008), and Finland's Aalto University.

We contacted Kari Kontturi, Managing Director of Aalto University Properties Ltd about the new faculties being created at Otaniemi, near Helsinki, which will assimilate two other existing campuses in Helsinki by 2017. The existing Otaniemi campus was largely created by architect Alvar Aalto and has been home to science and technology faculties since the 1960s.

He describes the site, explaining, "In order to squeeze in all the new students and staff coming from Helsinki, we have started a building project after which this area will look very different than today.

"New building consists of School of Arts and Design and a small shopping centre. Within that building project we will enhance the built outdoor environment all over the campus area and build new indoor connections between the separate old buildings to give shelter against winter weather and to enable spontaneous meetings of people."

And will this help attract new students? "I believe yes, but the effect will be indirect, which means that a new inspiring environment aids better research results and better innovations, which will then attract students and talented researchers to Otaniemi."

Skipping west over the sea to Scotland, we also spoke to Prof George Stonehouse, Dean of Edinburgh Napier Business School, who says of the faculty, "Student satisfaction in the Business School is the highest in the University and I am sure that the ambience and atmosphere of the buildings contribute to this. The Egg is obviously the single most iconic part of the campus, but unlike many iconic buildings, it embodies functional excellence."

Napier University Secretary, Gerry Webber adds, "What we asked architects BDP to do was to create an environment that reflected and embodied the core values of the university. We wanted something that was modern, innovative, open and inspiring – which is exactly what we got, particularly from The Egg."

But is good architectural design really one of the main deciding factors in a university's success? The universities themselves seem to think so, given that over the next five years the UK's 24 Russell Group universities alone will be investing £9 billion on capital projects. And it does seem to pay off. For example, *Estates Matter!* reports that while 'on average the number of UCAS applicants to UK universities was 21% higher in 2011/12 than in 2007/08', Ravensbourne experienced an increase of 123%, and the number of applicants to Edinburgh Napier University was up 97%.

