

Equal opportunities in architectural education: biases and barriers

Pilot study

Executive summary

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“We all know that inequalities and obstacles strongly exist and that their effects are enormous, but we need to measure them, to have the necessary scientific arguments for real change in institutional and governmental policies, as well as cultural change.”

A TUM teacher

Inequalities, bias, and obstacles in architectural education exist for some groups, leading to these being under-represented, or not represented at all, and to harmful effects to Higher Education Institutions, the Built Environment industry, and society at large. Yet too little empirical knowledge, which would be needed to implement changes amongst institutions and policymakers, is available to pinpoint the specific moments, mechanisms, and practices of exclusion and discrimination.

For this reason, the BauHow5 EDI working group, an alliance of six EU universities whose aim is to extend the boundaries of current pedagogy, research, and practice, and increase the value and social contribution of research and innovation in Architecture and the Built Environment, initiated a study. BauHow5 partners are: The Bartlett Faculty of the Built Environment of University College London, the School of Architecture of Chalmers University of Technology, the Department of Architecture of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich, the Department of Architecture of the Technical University of Munich, BK Bouwkunde of Delft University of Technology, and the KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm.

This pilot study focuses on students enrolled at the TU Munich's Department of Architecture; it tests the ground for future joint research on Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) in architectural education across Europe. It constitutes a first step towards investigating the demographic composition of the student population; it identifies intersectional socioeconomic and cultural factors that disadvantage some students, as well as specific points, barriers, and threshold moments of inequality in accessing and undergoing architectural education.

The study's three-step survey approach involves semi-structured interviews: first, at the institutional level; second, at the department level; and third, at the student level. In this way, it can test methodological approaches and point to obstacles encountered in working with aggregated student data.

Positions and perspectives

Three surveys were conducted at the TU Munich: the institutional framework was investigated through a set of guided interviews with student counsellors, advisers, administrators, controllers, and other university representatives. Their input provided the basis for a second set of interviews, this time with teachers from the Department of Architecture. Following those two sets of

interviews, an anonymous online survey of 165 students enrolled at the Department of Architecture provided material about their self-descriptions, self-identifications, and experiences linked to: gender and sexuality, ethnicity, transnationality, funding, care work, educational background, socioeconomic background and current situation, disability and health, access to courses, and perceptions of inclusion and representation.

Non-binary, disaggregated quantitative and qualitative data were collected in order to gain a better understanding of the diversity of the student body, study conditions, and the wellbeing of students from different backgrounds.

Who actually studies architecture?

If the TU Munich student body may be described as homogeneous, this applies even more to architecture students. Social reproduction seems very high, with a large group of students coming from an educated background; many have parents in architecture or related professional fields. The increasing regionalisation of the student body is possibly due to the extraordinary high living costs in Munich, encouraging more students to live with their family. Paradoxically, increasing internationalisation can be observed, most likely due to more students coming from far-away countries in Asia or the Middle East. Student groups described as absent, poorly (or not at all) represented, or not 'visible', have non-normative or non-binary gender identifications. Many interviewees noted the absence of German students descending from former Turkish guest workers; also remarkably absent are students with physical disabilities, students of colour, and 'first-generation students'.

Experiences of bias and obstacles

Under-represented groups are more likely to experience discrimination. Foreign students, in particular from Asian and Middle Eastern countries, tend to face racial discrimination and struggle more with student life, in particular housing conditions. Language barriers potentially lead to exclusion and disadvantage, both academically and socially, and may also trigger racial discrimination, mostly outside university. Too few courses are offered in English or hybrid language settings, leading to the separation of German-speaking and non-German-speaking students. Working students — especially those with little or no financial support from their parents — suffer from the heavy workload and economic hardship, for architecture studies are not only time-intensive, often requiring long days and weekend work, but also involve comparatively high costs for material and excursions.

Access to courses and study process

Studying architecture becomes increasingly difficult or even impossible if disadvantages accumulate, such as care work, health issues or lack of social support. Students who experience difficult situations tend to come from different cultural backgrounds, have a less solid economic background, or suffer from health issues. It very much helps to access and complete architecture studies if one's parents are educated or in the profession. It further helps to 'know the codes', to be self-confident, and not having to earn a living.

Student EDI: knowledge, culture, management and regulation

Both EDI-related knowledge and practice amongst counsellors, advisers, and administrators are high, though often scattered. This leads to effective bottom-up strategies and informal good practice, which would be even more effective if shared amongst organisational units. Strong GDPR constraints are an obstacle to extending diversity and inclusion work: intended to protect student privacy, these regulations prevent the development of more concrete support for student EDI initiatives. With EU bodies and agencies providing increasing funding for such initiatives, more concrete data would be needed.

Recommendations

- The collected quantitative data could be analysed as a preliminary cross-sectional 'test', helping to design longitudinal student surveys to capture threshold moments over a longer period of time and to follow specific student groups over time.
- Comparative research with other TU Munich units and within Germany, as well as within and outside the EU, would support transformation and innovation in architecture and built environment education.
- Collaboration with organisations and research institutes outside university, such as the Chamber of Architects or Studierendenwerk, or with educational foundations, is recommended.
- Sharing best practices and collaboration between management, EDI offices, and various academic departments of the TU Munich should be encouraged.
- EDI surveys of students should be conducted on a regular basis as part of a long-term EDI strategic plan.
- Categories in student data collections, such as 'international student', 'male', or 'female' need to be deconstructed and student data dis-aggregated.
- Sponsorships and funding for underprivileged students in the Architecture and Built Environment sector are needed.
- More courses in the English language or language hybrid classes should be offered.
- Portfolio preparation courses could be offered to applicants and the diversity of examiners involved in admission interviews should be increased.

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