

Accreditation & Degree Awarding Powers

for Open session

Subject:

Requirement for accredited Learning Providers to have degree awarding powers

Board meeting:

11 February 2025

Agenda item:

9

Action:

- For noting
- For discussion
- For decision

Purpose

To consider the results of the consultation on whether learning providers must have degree awarding powers, or a formal relationship with a provider who does, to have their master's level qualifications accredited by ARB, and to decide on any changes to the Accreditation Rules.

Recommendation

It is recommended that the Board:

- Considers the consultation report (Annexe A); and
 - Makes no change to the Accreditation Rules (Annexe B)
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Annexes

Annexe A: Consultation analysis report

Annexe B: [ARB Accreditation Rules](#)

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1. Open Session

- 1.1. This item will be noted in the open session of the Board meeting.
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2. Introduction

- 2.1. In October 2023 ARB introduced a new set of accreditation procedures as part of the wider Initial Education & Training reforms. The new procedures were formalised by way of the Accreditation Rules.

- 2.2. One of the requirements, set out in [Accreditation Rule 4.2](#), is that any Learning Provider who is applying to ARB for accreditation of a Level 7 masters qualification (or equivalent) must either have degree awarding powers or have a formal relationship with a body with such powers. This means that as an academic institution delivering an academic qualification, it is subject to additional oversight from the relevant academic regulator¹.

*“Applicants seeking accreditation of master’s-level qualifications that do not hold **degree awarding powers** must have a continuing formal agreement with an awarding body in order for relevant qualifications to be accredited”*

- 2.3. The existence of this rule has been challenged, both in terms of its policy intent and the process by which it has been introduced. As a result, the Board decided in September 2024 to consult on the rule.

3. Background

- 3.1. ARB operates an accreditation procedure that accredits academic qualifications delivered at master’s level. Those organisations which deliver these qualifications that have degree awarding powers are subject to additional regulation from a relevant academic regulator.
- 3.2. An organisation which registers with the relevant higher education regulator so it can hold degree awarding powers must satisfy a wide range of ongoing conditions.

¹ In England this is the Office for Students, in Wales the Higher Education Funding Wales, the Scottish Funding Council, The Northern Ireland Department for the Economy.

3.3. It must ensure that its relevant qualifications align with the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in the UK, a necessary component of comparability with international qualification frameworks, which underpin Mutual Recognition Agreements.

3.4. It must also provide the relevant regulator with assurance in relation to key areas of the delivery of its academic qualifications:

- *Contingency Planning:* the institution must demonstrate that in the event of the failure of the organisation, there is a plan to ensure any enrolled students are provided with an alternate means to continue and complete their study. ARB requires that an individual school show that it has the means to ensure continuity of study in the case of staff shortages and other forms of short-term disruption, but it does not request a school show how it will guarantee students may continue study in the event of permanent closure.
- *Finances:* the institution must demonstrate that it is financially viable, and has the resources necessary to comply with all conditions of registration
- *Resources, support and student engagement:* the institution must demonstrate that each cohort receives resources and support, including physical resources such as career advice, study advice and other pastoral measures.
- *Academic culture:* the institution must be part of a self-critical, cohesive academic community with a proven commitment to the assurance of standards supported by effective quality systems.

3.5. A learning provider may also deliver an ARB accredited master's level qualification without having degree awarding powers², as long as it is in a formal agreement with an organisation who is registered with the relevant higher education regulator. By having a formal agreement, it provides the necessary additional regulatory assurance and oversight. There are currently three providers in this position, the Royal Institute of British Architects, the London School of Architecture and the Centre for Alternative Technology.

² An organisation does not need to have the title 'University' to award degrees; there is a separate process to gain the title 'University'.

4. Rationale for requiring Degree Awarding Powers

- 4.1. The requirement for master's level qualifications to be delivered by organisations with qualification awarding powers is not new. It was previously a requirement of the European Qualifications Directive that academic qualifications leading to registration must be 'university level' qualifications.
- 4.2. These conditions provide ARB with assurance that accredited providers are legitimate institutions of higher education which will continue to deliver master's level qualifications in an appropriate academic setting.
- 4.3. The broad remit and powers of enforcement provided by separate academic regulation means ARB can have confidence the currency of master's level awards that are accredited. Where ARB accredits a provider without degree awarding powers but evidences a formal relationship with an organisation with such powers, ARB benefits from the same confidence of external oversight, whilst mitigating regulatory duplication.
- 4.4. ARB has the power under its Accreditation Rules to hold learning providers to the [Standards for Learning Providers](#). These Standards provide ARB with the confidence that learning providers will specifically be able to deliver qualifications that meet the Competence Outcomes but are not designed to provide wider assurance as to the suitability of the provider as an academic institution.
- 4.5. The alternative option would be to remove the requirement for a learning provider to be regulated by a relevant academic regulator. This would have the benefit of 'opening the market' to alternative providers but remove the additional assurances ARB could rely on as detailed above and would require significant risk mitigation.
- 4.6. This would require ARB to seek those assurances through its own accreditation procedures in respect of 'non-regulated' organisations.
- 4.7. Building such capability and capacity would significant additional resource and effort, the cost of which would need to be passed on to the learning providers or borne by the profession. Furthermore, it would represent a duplication of regulation already in place that would offend the principles of better regulation.
- 4.8. Acquiring some of the assurances provided by the academic regulators, in particular in respect of long-term financial viability, would be beyond the capability of ARB. By this we mean that we would have to build an entirely new team of, for example, financial experts, whose expertise would only be required sporadically for a very small number of accredited providers. It would not be proportionate nor sustainable

to take this approach and it would, in turn, hamper our ability to effectively accredit the vast majority of qualifications.

- 4.9. Only three currently accredited providers do not have degree awarding powers and all of them have a relationship with those that do. As a result, no accredited providers would have accreditation revoked as a result of this rule.
- 4.10. It has been suggested that there could be an exception in Rules for bodies with Royal Charter status, but while Royal Charter status is an important mark of expertise and learning in a particular sector, it does not provide the assurance around academic regulation as described above.
- 4.11. It has also been suggested to us directly by RIBA and was raised in consultation responses, that the Rule would limit access to the profession. We have considered this argument, but given there are no current providers impacted by this Rule, we do not see this as a significant risk. It is of course possible that opening up the market to those who are not academic providers would increase access, but we have to balance the risk to standards and the cost impact of changing our accreditation methodology as described above.

5. Consultation

- 5.1. The analysis of the six-week consultation is at **Annexe A**. We received 10 responses, which was an expected level of feedback on what is a relatively narrow area of our work.
- 5.2. All respondents were in support of the principle that ARB should seek appropriate assurances about a learning providers' capability and capacity to deliver accredited qualifications.
- 5.3. Most respondents supported the requirement for a learning provider to hold degree awarding powers or have a formal agreement with an organisation which does, if they are to deliver an accredited master's level qualification.
- 5.4. The only two objectors to the rule were the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) and the Royal Society of Ulster Architects (RSUA). While acknowledging that the rule would not affect any existing providers, they submit that the restriction would have the potential to limit routes to the Register, which contradicts ARB's stated goal of widening access to the profession.

6. Equality, Diversity & Inclusion

- 6.1. Most respondents were of the view that the relevant rule does not have a negative impact on equality, diversity and inclusion.
- 6.2. The RIBA and RSUA submitted that the restriction on who can provide accredited qualifications will stifle innovation from the education sector, which could in turn have a negative impact on widening diversity within architecture.
- 6.3. This argument has some hypothetical force, but the Board will recognise that the reforms to the initial education and training of architects introduced in 2023 are already allowing a wider variety of routes to registration.
- 6.4. The rule does not impact on any existing learning providers. We have been unable to identify any particular group that is disadvantaged by its retention.

7. Rule 4.2

- 7.1. Accreditation Rule 4.2 makes it a requirement for a learning provider to have degree awarding powers (or be in a formal agreement with an organisation that does) in order for ARB to accredit its master's level qualifications.
- 7.2. While increasing the diversity of ways to become an architect is a laudable aim, ARB must balance it against our ability to ensure that learning providers are capable of properly delivering accredited qualifications. Protecting that ability to regulate reduces the risks of incompetent persons becoming eligible to practise as an architect.
- 7.3. There is nothing within the consultation responses that should lead the Board to change its longstanding position that is reflected in Accreditation Rule 4.2.

8. Risks

8.1. Rule 4.2 does not impact on any existing providers of accredited qualifications. We do not know of any institutions that wish to have master's level qualifications accredited by ARB that don't hold degree awarding powers or have a formal agreement with one that does. There is always a risk of future challenge from a provider that is prevented from delivering accredited qualifications by this restriction. The Board should have confidence that its decision has been properly made, so that it is capable of meeting any such challenge.

9. Recommendation

It is recommended that the Board:

- i) Considers the consultation report (Annexe A); and
- ii) Makes no change to the Accreditation Rules (Annexe B)

Annexe A - Consultation analysis report

Responses we received

1. The consultation was open between 24 September and 4 November 2024. During that time it received 10 responses.
2. Five respondents were registered architects, including one who was also an academic. There was one other academic, one Part 2 architecture student, and one architectural assistant, designer or consultant (not Part 3 qualified). We also received responses from both the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) and Royal Society of Ulster Architects (RSUA).
3. We have not analysed the other characteristics of respondents (for example, gender, ethnicity or location) because the number of respondents is too small for us to be able to identify any trends.

Results

4. We asked five questions about the proposals, including three that were optional. The two required questions were 'closed' multiple choice questions and allowed respondents to add further comments to their response. Of the further optional questions, one was a 'closed' multiple choice question with an optional free-text response and two were optional free-text written response questions.
5. Every response was read and analysed. The questions and a summary of the responses to each is below.

To what extent do you agree that ARB should receive assurance in relation to factors such as the governance, financial integrity and academic culture, resources and student engagement of those providing accredited qualifications at master's level?

6. All 10 respondents agreed with this approach, with eight strongly agreeing and two agreeing. Three respondents provided further comments on this question.
7. One respondent who strongly agreed with this statement commented that many degrees related to architecture are unavailable for those without wealthy backgrounds or sponsors. They highlighted examples of master's level courses that they thought were too expensive and missing important content.
8. Two official responses from RIBA and RSUA both commented³ that it should not be the only way for ARB to seek relevant assurance when it comes to institutions with degree awarding powers, even though they are subject to oversight from the relevant academic regulator. RIBA and RSUA also expected that for those that are not

³ There were occasions when both RIBA and RSUA used the same or very similar sentences in response to the open text questions. We have treated each response as its own individual one in all these occasions.

subject to additional oversight from the relevant academic regulator, ARB can follow a process to ensure the necessary quality assurance processes are in place.

To what extent do you agree with ARB's requirement that learning providers who wish to provide ARB accredited qualifications at 'master's level' must hold degree awarding powers, or have a formal agreement with an organisation who does?

9. Overall, 70% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed: six strongly agreed and one agreed. One neither agreed nor disagreed, and two respondents strongly disagreed with this statement.
10. The respondent who neither agreed nor disagreed said that ARB itself may want to grant qualifications in future and that this Rule being in place could inhibit that.
11. RIBA strongly disagreed with this statement. They claimed that changing the term from "qualification awarding powers" to "degree awarding powers" will have a negative impact on the diversity of the profession, against the aims of ARB's education reforms. They said it will "reinforce the de facto and elitist exclusion of apprenticeship and college-based routes to qualification", and that "ARB has closed the door to learning providers who provide innovative and diverse routes to the required professional qualifications." They did not provide data for this but used the example of private providers and compared this to other professions, such as the solicitor level 7 apprenticeship.
12. RIBA said that in the Architects Act 1997, the term qualifications is used to describe the awards leading to registration, rather than using the term degrees. Therefore, RIBA believed that by conducting this approach, "ARB is overstepping its current legal powers." They claimed that this proposal is "anti-competitive and on balance contravenes the Competition Act 1998", and that under RIBA's Royal Charter it can award its own qualifications in its own right.
13. RIBA also mentioned the partnership between their RIBA Studio and Oxford Brookes and acknowledged that the terms of that arrangement satisfy ARB's proposed change to the Rule. They also said that other regulated professions such as the accounting profession and solicitors can qualify through bodies that grant qualifications that are not a degree.
14. RSUA also strongly disagreed. Their view was that changing the term has the potential to reduce the variety of routes to become an architect in the future and would restrict innovation. They said this should be avoided.

Our proposal would not impact the accreditation of qualifications being provided by any current providers. However, we are keen to hear about any unintended consequences that we haven't considered.

15. Five respondents provided responses to this optional question.

16. One respondent suggested there could be an annual review of the conditions set by other regulators “to ensure that no conflicts arise”. They did not provide examples of the potential conflicts they anticipated.
17. One respondent said there is a potential omission in that ARB does not require that assurances or agreements are with UK regulated bodies. Such assurances include governance, financial integrity and academic culture, resources and student engagement. The respondent is not entirely clear whether the omission is that they are not specifically *UK* regulatory bodies but we have interpreted it as this.
18. One respondent used the consultation to ask us to approve the accreditation of a specific Part 2 course.
19. RIBA acknowledged that “no current providers, as they are run at this present time, will be affected by the proposed change”. They said the proposal does not consider the future context where a provider of qualifications may not be associated with an organisation that has degree awarding powers.
20. Several potential unintended consequences were raised by RIBA. First, they mentioned a potential impact on students from less affluent backgrounds, saying that “if students have studied a non-architecture undergraduate degree”, they may be “enduring even longer study periods with higher fees”. They said this “could result in some students unable to study architecture due to their financial position”.
21. Second, RIBA was concerned that there will be “extremely limited” possibilities for universities “to charge less than the prevailing annual tuition fee rate”. They did not provide more information on this but said it will potentially limit the opening up of the profession. They further used the RIBA Studio programme as an example, stating that although the programme will not be impacted by the change from qualification awarding powers to degree awarding powers at the present, there would be a restriction on RIBA delivering an alternative programme in future on its own.
22. Lastly, RIBA believed the requirement to hold degree awarding powers or have a formal agreement with an organisation who does, “would prevent private training providers entering the market”, which could reduce the number of routes into the profession and limit competition. They added that it is common for there to be private training providers for Level 7 that do not hold degree awarding powers in other professions.
23. RSUA referred to their response to the previous questions and emphasised that “any step that could potentially limit innovation would be a backward step” for improving access to the profession.

We do not believe there will be any negative impact on equality, diversity or inclusion given the proposal will not impact on any current qualifications. Do you agree?

24. All 10 respondents answered this question. Six agreed that our proposals will not have a negative impact on equality, diversity, or inclusion (EDI). Three disagreed and one was unsure. Three of the respondents provided further comments below.
25. RIBA disagreed with this statement. They said it was “shortsighted” for this consultation to focus on current qualifications when ARB’s previous consultation had included wanting to enable learning providers to innovate. They said the proposal will have a negative impact on EDI, that it will negate work that ARB and RIBA are doing to widen access to the profession, and they were disappointed that no equality impact assessment had been carried out.
26. RSUA also disagreed with this statement, saying there could be a negative impact on EDI if the development of new qualifications was curtailed.
27. One respondent who disagreed with this statement reiterated their general concern from the earlier question about the cost of master’s level courses.

Is there anything else you would like to tell us about the Accreditation Rules?

28. We received four responses to this question. Two reiterated points that have been summarised above.
29. The other two responses were from RIBA and RSUA. Both made the same comments that they are supportive of ARB’s work on Mutual Recognition Agreements while saying that these agreements can still allow for non-degree qualifications.