Frontiers in Art and Design; Vol. 1, No. 2; 2025
ISSN 3066-974X E-ISSN 3066-9758
https://doi.org/10.30560/fad.v1n2p1

Student Experiences in Institutions of Higher learning: A Case Study of Uganda's Leading Architecture Programme

Arch. Kenneth Ssemwogerere[1]

[1] Senior Lecturer, Ag Head of Department, Department of Architecture, School of Built Environment, Makerere University, Uganda

Correspondence: Kenneth Ssemwogerere, Makerere University, P.O. Box 7062 Kampala, Uganda. Tel: 256-783-164-909. E-mail: ssemogerere@yahoo.com

Received: August 1, 2025 Accepted: August 26, 2025 Online Published: August 28, 2025

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Abstract

Student experience has a strategic importance to any institution of higher learning, as it can potentially impact on the institution's reputation, as well as long-term sustainability. The present study is an exploration of student experiences in higher institutions of learning in Uganda, taking Makerere University Architecture School (MUAS) as the case study. Using a mixed-method research approach, the study sought to evaluate students' perspectives on the architectural teaching program and their extent of success at MUAS. The study focused on 70 graduates from Makerere University's architectural program, specifically those who completed the programme within five years. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics. In the findings, students revealed that the program placed significant academic and psychological demands on them throughout the five-year duration. They revealed the intense workload, unclear academic expectations, and the emotional strain caused by harsh critique and punitive course-retake policies of the university. Equally concerning were the strained relationships between students and tutors, with over half describing these as difficult or very difficult. The physical and resource environment was identified as a critical barrier to student success. Inadequate teaching-studio spaces, lack of fulltime access, insufficient workshops, and outdated equipment have a serious impact on their innovation as Architecture students. Recommendations include revision of the curriculum to achieve a better balance between theoretical knowledge and practical skills. Others are infrastructural improvements, such as upgrading and expanding studio spaces to provide dedicated, fulltime accessible workspace will encourage creativity and collaboration and the establishment of well-equipped workshops and digital fabrication labs.

Keywords: student experience, higher institutions of learning, architecture, Uganda

1. Introduction

The importance of education in promoting sustainable development is extensively documented, with effective training being a critical element (Haines, 2011; Mochizuki & Bryan, 2015). Subsequently, researchers and policymakers highlight that sustainable education is necessary for setting up a robust built environment (Allu & Ebohon, 2015). This puts a major obligation on architectural instructors to guide students through the changing developments in architectural practices, especially regarding the formation of ecological buildings that address climate change (Surat et al., 2011). A definite educational philosophy is important for modelling students who can successfully contribute to the growth of any nation (Surat et al., 2011).

As emphasised by Olweny (2010), the evolution of architectural education is an important element of our environmental agenda, reproducing the prospective for stirring human capabilities and finally leaving a lasting mark on the quality of graduates. The International Union of Architects (UNESCO, UIA, 2008) avers that architectural education should seek to nurture professionals who are intelligently grounded, capable, ecologically aware, socially accountable, and internationally alert.

In an interrelated world, studies on architectural education have surveyed varied fundamentals of academic development (Olweny, 2010). Studies have assessed learning methods of students, the admission processes and how technology is integrated in design projects (Shannon & Radford, 2010). However, the studies have been found

to underrepresent the input of the students, who are key stakeholders in this education system (Olweny, 2010). Instead, the contributions of students are restricted to the evaluation of design projects instead of directly engaging them as active contributors in the educational process.

In the United Kingdom, mentorship programmes in architectural learning have paid dividends, with many stakeholders recommending their implementation for aiding the professional growth of students (Atwal et al., 2007). In India, the "Minimum Standards of Architectural Education" have been lauded for effectively assessing measurable characteristics. However, they have been criticised for undermining the qualitative side, possibly affecting the total instructive experience (Khan & Kahn, 2019). Institutions of higher learning are criticised for paying more attention to the basic requirements instead of tracking inventive pedagogical approaches.

In Malaysia, problems affecting the architectural industry, such as substandard buildings, have been blamed on inadequacies in human capital development, which starts with learning institutions (Surat et al., 2011). In China, higher institutions of learning have been hailed for paying attention to creating and nurturing creativity and innovation through curriculum reforms (Qin & Wang, 2020). Nevertheless, architectural design courses have stuck to traditional teaching methods that rely on obsolete design processes and not incorporating current research and inventive thinking (Qin & Wang, 2020).

In the developing world, especially Africa, the rising enthusiasm for architectural professions has put more focus on architectural teaching (Olweny, 2010). However, there is a documented shortage of research regarding African educational instruction, predominantly concerning native knowledge and its bearing on instructional practices (Ngara, 2007). In Nigeria, worries have been raised about the inadequate incorporation of sustainable development education in architectural programmes (Allu, 2014).

In Uganda, architectural education, including the programmes at Makerere University, has transformed over the past 40 years (Olweny, 2010; Mulumba, 1988; Olweny & Nshemereirwe, 2006). Architectural education in Uganda, like in many parts of Africa, was prejudiced by the British colonial curriculum, which did not effectively take into consideration the country's socio-cultural context (Olweny, 2010). The Uganda National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) has been pivotal in the development of national standards for architectural education (NCHE, 2008; **Lema, 2012).** This is to meet the rising demand for architects who are skilled and ready to deal with Uganda's infrastructure challenges, such as housing deficiencies and urban planning. NCHE and the Uganda Institute of Architects (UIA), have been tasked with the accreditation of architectural programmes (NCHE, 2008) to ensure that universities meet the criteria necessary to guarantee that their graduates are qualified and can practice as qualified architects. The universities are to ensure that students do internships and practical training during their studies to acquire hands-on experience in real-world architectural projects (**Lema, 2012).**

The national criteria also call for the incorporation of indigenous architectural knowledge and local building techniques into the curriculum. However, many institutions struggle to meet these standards. Olweny (2010), citing Pido (2002) says many universities are still stuck in traditional teaching methods that do not adequately consider student experiences. The supposition that academic achievement only replicates effective learning supposes the importance of student enthusiasm and observations (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). Therefore, this study aims to explore the student perspectives on architectural education at Makerere University to address this knowledge gap.

Makerere University has been a key player in influencing the future of architectural education in Uganda and across Africa. The university's **Department of Architecture** in the College of Engineering, Design, Art and Technology (CEDAT) has established a reputation for giving students a solid groundwork in both theoretical and practical aspects of architecture. The curriculum assimilates several subjects such as architectural design, history, construction technology, urbanism, and environmental sustainability (Akinmoladun et al., 2020). However, like many universities worldwide, Makerere is currently faced with many challenges that impact the excellence of architectural education. Past studies done by government and private stakeholders have listed challenges in enticing and retaining qualified staff, obsolete curriculum methods, inadequate learning materials, poor facilities, and cash restraints (Makerere University, 2017).

In the same vein, empirical studies concerning the views of students of architecture at Makerere University on the quality of the teaching and learning process are not documented (Olweny, 2014). Since students are key stakeholders in the learning process, their views are important for the evaluation of education processes. It is against this background that this paper aims to examine the student experience in the architecture programme at Makerere University, with a particular focus on their satisfaction with curriculum content and the effectiveness of instructional procedures. The study was guided by the following research objectives:

1) To evaluate the course curriculum against evolving practice demands

2) To evaluate the quality of the teaching and learning facilities
3) To ascertain the student–tutor relationship at the Architecture School
4) To establish the likelihood of recommending someone to study architecture at Makerere
5) To identify general students' concerns about the program

2. Literature Review

2.1 Architectural Education Curriculum

Curriculum development is the pillar of architectural education, influencing upcoming experts by creating an organised way to obtain both practical knowledge and imaginative shrewdness (**Sullivan, 2014)**. Over the last two decades, curriculum in architectural education has been a centre of debate, given the evolving requirements of the architectural profession, technological changes and changing societal problems. Baker et al (2019) assert that accreditation bodies, such as the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) and the European Association for Architectural Education (EAAE) play the crucial role of shaping the architectural curriculum. They explain that these bodies impact curriculum content by putting in place professional standards and guaranteeing that students get the required proficiencies to practice architecture across Europe. Qin & Wang (2020) add that architectural design courses are at the heart of architectural education, always taking between four and five years of study.

Lizondo-Sevilla et al. (2019) opine that studying architectural history is important since it informs architectural design, giving insights into the building ways of the past and their socio-cultural contexts. They add that this method goes beyond just the imitation of styles but highlights how architectural methods, resources, and functions have evolved over the years. **Markus & Schork (2014)** assert that architectural curricula in Europe give due attention to the classical and cultural context of building and construction by promoting a more intimate understanding of the theory so as to inform the contemporary architectural challenges such as sustainability. The same happens in Italy and France, where architectural schools incorporate the history of architecture into current design practices (Frampton, 2001).

The architectural curriculum as well as the profession have been subjected to criticism due to lack of diversity by failing to address the needs of vulnerable groups such as women, and people from different socioeconomic backgrounds (Tucker 2013). Therefore, architectural schools must promote inclusivity in student demographics and curriculum design. Architectural design education is supposed to strike a balance between the promotion of student innovation and disciplinary teaching (Lizondo-Sevilla et al., 2019). This involves incorporating theoretical information with practical skills, and nurturing contemplative analysis of design choices (Arís, 2005). The systematic feature of design, including both standard architectural principles and specific project contexts, is important (Grassi, 1980). Drawing plays a key role in this process as a medium of exploration rather than a mere representational tool.

In Africa, the curriculum in many architectural schools is changing to solve many historical and current design issues while replicating the continent's various social, political, and economic contexts (Ogunbanwo, 2017). However, more is needed to integrate students' views into curriculum design and teaching methodology, a motivation for this study. Focusing on Africa, Akinmoladun (2020) and Moyo (2018) stress that architecture schools focus their curricula on sustainability by providing answers for energy-efficient buildings and environmentally friendly practices. This is because of the rising threats of climate change, hence integrating sustainable design principles. Shittu (2019) adds that African architectural education is starting to find solutions to the problems of informal urban development, where students are stimulated to design scalable solutions to informal housing and community development. However, architectural curricula have been perceived to be rigid and not ready to adapt to new changes in the profession, such as technological advancements or changes in the community and environmental situations of architecture. Consequently, students may study, finish and graduate with an inadequate perception of modern-day problems plaguing the profession and how to solve them.

The incorporation of digital tools and technology into architectural training is another important development in recent years. With improvements in computational design, 3D modelling, and simulation tools, the teaching of architecture has progressively amalgamated these technologies to augment both design and visualization skills (Gero & Tversky, 2013). These methods enhance design philosophy and imagination. Oladokun and Akinsiku (2021) assert that many educational models in Africa emphasise the use of digital tools and modern construction technologies.

2.2 Pedagogical Methods in Architectural Education

Qin & Wang (2020) warn that old pedagogical methods are often characterised by failure to integrate teaching and produce fragmented delivery of a curriculum. This is due to failing to clarify the learning objectives and the progression of content in academic levels. Olweny (2010) adds that there is a threat of stagnation of curricula due to adherence to old-fashioned design methods, with the common concern being reliance on a linear design process—"assignment, initial sketch, refined sketch, final drawings"—which does not capture modern social and technological developments (Olweny, 2010). Therefore, architecture schools must stress vertical consistency and horizontal amalgamation, guaranteeing a systematic evolution of learning objectives and content, and that each term is methodically considered to address learning objectives.

Another pedagogical approach in architectural education is Project-Based Learning (PBL). Kuh (2008) states that PBL stresses learning through dealing with practical world challenges and the repetitive practice of design, which is very applicable to architectural practice. Biggs & Tang (2011) add that PBL matches with the requirement for "constructivist" learning, where students enthusiastically generate their knowledge by resolving problems and cooperating. Surat et al. (2011) explain that this hands-on involvement guarantees that teaching is relevant to modern-day practical applications. Impactful architectural design training comprises organised evolution of project exercises, moving from simple to complex, personalised to students' cognitive growth and academic level (Surat et al., 2011). Supporting subjects, such as architectural history, building technology, and environmental science, should be assimilated to strengthen design philosophies. Teachers' amount of work should match their skills and students' learning requirements.

Architectural design drills should start with students' comments and spatial understanding, decoding these into intangible representations through sketches and models (Zahari, 2006). This procedure promotes a thoughtful relationship between individuals and their surroundings. The use of environmental illustrations and figurative approaches can help in the transmission of abstract perceptions (Bransford et al., 2006). Demonstrations and research-based learning help to strengthen student interaction and understanding, especially for those in the initial stages of design learning (Zahari, 2006; Siegel, 2002).

Collaborative learning is an additional educational method that is increasingly gaining prominence in architectural instruction. **Günther (2017) asserts that** collaboration helps to prepare learners for the realities of architectural training, with emphasis on coordination and interdisciplinary engagement. **Günther (2017)** explains that interdisciplinary research incorporates various fields, such as urban design, engineering, and environmental science, in architectural education. Simulation assignments have also been mooted to encourage students' imagination and inspire the incorporation of historic and traditional influences into contemporary designs (Zahari, 2006). This method inspires students to develop a "spirit of place" and "spirit of time" in their designs, reproducing both site-specific features and modern-day tendencies. Architectural practice requires the incorporation of cognitive, emotional, and intuitive reasoning, which should be reflected in architectural pedagogy (Salama, 2008).

Boyer & Mitgang (1996) designate the "design studio" as the foundation of architectural education. They assert that the studio model inspires imagination and critical thinking, assisting students in cultivating a holistic understanding of architectural problems. Liu et al. (2019) state: "The architectural design studio acts as a key pedagogical space where students can cultivate the cognitive and creative tools necessary for architectural problem-solving." In the UK, **Smith (2010)** encourages the importance of studio training in assisting students to produce technical, cultural, and artistic constituents of architecture. Institutions such as the Architectural Association (AA) and the University of Cambridge stress an amalgamation of laborious hypothetical coursework and practical design challenges.

The idea of human-focused design has arisen as a key educational approach, where the focus moves to the social and environmental effects of architecture. The model integrates themes of sustainability, accessibility, and user experience. Pallasmaa (2012) asserts that architecture should not only answer appealing and purposeful requirements but also involve the emotional and psychological familiarity of the users. Thompson & Simmons (2014) explain how the European architectural curriculum has incorporated sustainable design philosophies and digital technologies with topics such as energy-efficient structure, green architecture, and smart technologies being emphasised. This is in line with EU policies that promote environmental sustainability in construction.

3. Method

3.1 Research Approach

This study employed a mixed-methods research approach, using qualitative and quantitative techniques. The mixed-methods approach is endorsed because it ensures an comprehensive investigation of graduates' capabilities and insights into the architecture programme at Makerere University (Creswell, 2014).

3.2 Study Area and Participants

The study is contextualised in Uganda, a least developed sub-Saharan country that typically grapples with education quality due to limited resources and lack of adequate prioritisation. Respondents were graduates from Makerere University's architectural programme, specifically those who completed the programme within five years.

3.3 Sample Size

A sample size of about 70 graduates was carefully chosen, bearing in mind representation of age, sex, and experience. Such a study population enables a balanced representation, augmenting the generalizability and fullness of the findings (Fink, 2013). This approach supports best practices in survey research, where demographic diversity is fundamental for capturing a wide range of perspectives.

3.4 Data Collection Measures

An online structured questionnaire was administered to graduates to gather quantifiable data on their satisfaction with various characteristics of the architectural training programme, such as curriculum content, teaching methodologies, infrastructure, faculty engagement, and institutional support. The survey was designed to gather data on the graduates' perception of the programme in organising them for specialised practice. Administering online structured questionnaires permits proficient data collection from a geographically detached sample (Bryman, 2016). Likert scale questions, multiple choice, and ranking questions were included. An open-ended question was included to gather qualitative data on general students' concerns about the program. This was aimed at discovering in more detail the qualitative aspects of the graduates' experiences, including challenges faced during their studies. Open-ended questions provide qualitative perceptions into individual understandings, challenges, and views that may not be fully captured through closed-ended questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

3.5 Data Analysis

The responses from the survey were analysed using descriptive statistics to condense the data and identify tendencies in graduate satisfaction and views. Statistical software such as SPSS and Excel were used for data processing. Interview and focus group records were analysed using thematic analysis to classify recurrent themes, patterns, and perceptions. This examination was directed by the study's objectives, with emphasis on ascertaining strengths and weaknesses in the architectural training programme from the graduates' views. The study observed ethical principles for research, guaranteeing that all participants provided knowledgeable consent. Privacy and confidentiality were upheld throughout the research process, and participants were guaranteed that their responses would be used exclusively for academic purposes.

4. Results

4.1 Recruitment

Out of the sampled 70 respondents, 66 responded to the questionnaire. In order to obtain data from a particular sample of graduates who studied at the School at the same time, the study sought to establish the period the respondents studied.

Table 1. Period of Study at Makerere University Architecture School

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
1990s	1.52%	1
2000s	6.06%	4
2010s	57.57%	38
2020s	51.51%	34
Total Respondents		66

Findings indicate that most graduates were at Makerere University's architecture school during the 2010s (57.57%) and 2020s (51.51%). Only a small fraction were at the school in the 1990s (1.52%) and 2000s (6.06%). These findings, therefore, lend credence to the study as they depict a current reflection of the training experience.

4.2 General Students' Experience at Makerere University Architecture School

The study sought to establish the students' experiences in the five years they spent at the university while doing architecture.

Table 2. Students' Experience at Makerere University Architecture School

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Very easy	1.54%	1
Easy	4.54%	3
Difficult	61.54%	40
Very difficult	33.85%	22
TOTAL		66

From the above findings, the majority of the respondents (95%) said the five-year programme was "difficult" or "very difficult." Only 1.5% described it as "very easy" and 4.54% as easy. From the interviews, the respondents said the course has very high psychological pressure, which they partially attributed to the ambiguity of expectations, lack of organised academic switch from high school, and the mental effect from many design rejections and retakes as one respondent said:

> *The sharp jump from conceptual learning to real-world scale and application leaves many students overwhelmed, especially without consistent mentoring and feedback.*

Respondents said first-year students often face a reality check as their hopes change fast. There is general agreement that tutors do not adequately cover the transition from secondary school to architecture school. The complexity of projects grows rapidly, with students revealing year three (factory design) and fifth year (portfolio and research) as mostly difficult. One responded noted that:

> *"Third year had a lot to learn in one semester… The fifth year is when you go deep into design."*

The quick transition from conceptual learning to practical scale and application leaves many students stunned, especially without regular mentoring and feedback. Most respondents said there is a large amount of work, which most do not know how to handle it. Most respondents cited that every year of study has its stresses. While some said the 2nd year, others said the 5th year is very demanding since you have to apply everything that you learnt in the other years.

> *"The first year felt like doing an exam for something I was new to, especially a design portfolio. Third year had a lot to learn in one semester, especially the first semester."*

Others said tutors do not seem to fully change them from secondary school to architecture school. They said tutors simply give retakes, and they don't release coursework results, and they assume abstract reasoning from students, which often has no firm architectural basis.

4.3 Evaluation Architectural Course Curriculum Against Evolving Practice Demands

The study sought to establish whether the current school curriculum was equipping the students to handle the ever increasing architectural practice requirements.

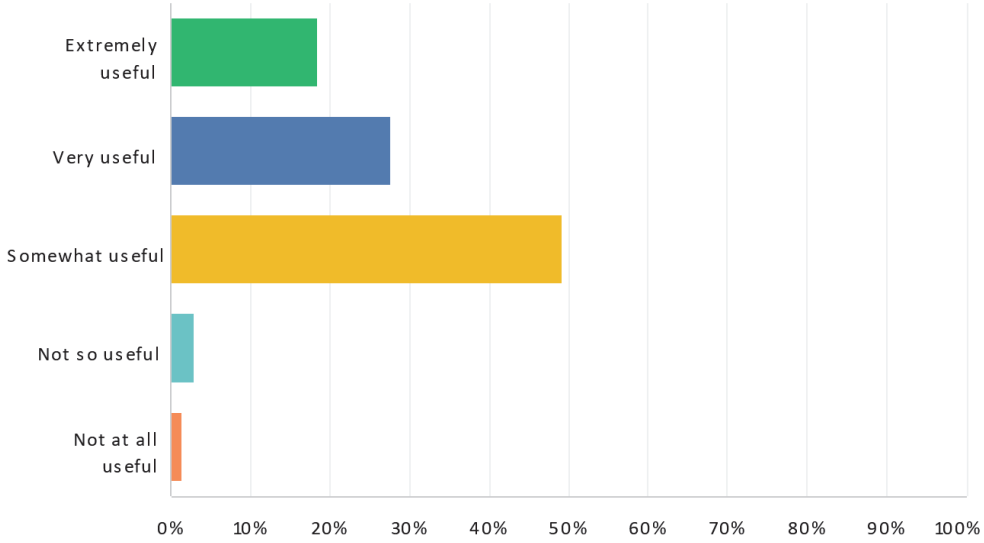

Figure 1. Whether Subjects are Taught at the School Against the Practice Requirements

Source: Primary Data

Most respondents (about 48%) said the subjects taught at the school against the practice requirements were somewhat useful while another 28% said they were very useful and 18% said they were extremely useful. Those who said they were not useful called for the curriculum to reflect current architectural practice with emphasis on real-life projects and execution, not just design theory, better integration of CAD and modelling software, mentorship, mental health support, and a shift from punitive assessment culture Several students also proposed abolishing full-year retakes and instead introducing shorter remedial opportunities. They said not everyone is good in portfolio and urged lecturers to approach the weak students too and help them gain confidence and courage in what they are learning.

> *"Tutors should explain their evaluation and marking criteria so students are more aware of their shortcomings. The sequence of design should be more fluid. Not everyone designs with a concept at the outset, but they will have a design intention or direction. Allow more fluid thinking than strictly starting at concept to outline to scheme etc. Tutors may also benefit the students by presenting their own projects and how they approached them from inception to completion to show them how it is done in an office. In short it should me more practical,"*

Source: Primary Data

Apart from imparting knowledge, the respondents said the school can also engage the students directly about their mental health. Secondly, they said they believe mentorship should be at university level.

The respondents raised several concerns about their training environment, particularly around the design portfolio and broader learning experience. A common theme is the need for more tutors and personalised guidance, with calls for increased one-on-one sessions and better mentorship. Many students reported emotional distress due to harsh or unprofessional behaviour from some tutors, which has at times left lasting trauma. There is a strong demand for tutors to exhibit greater emotional intelligence and foster a more supportive, encouraging atmosphere to promote growth rather than fear.

Portfolio assessment emerged as another major pain point. Students feel expectations are not clearly communicated and that grading is often inconsistent, inflexible, and sometimes punitive. The current policy requiring students who fail the portfolio to repeat an entire academic year is widely viewed as inhumane. Alternative suggestions like short-term remedial opportunities and holiday-based resubmissions reflect international best practices in competency-based education, where the focus is on mastery and timely feedback, not rigid timelines.

Many recommend introducing remedial opportunities during holidays to allow timely progression. Others argue that the portfolio should be treated like other design courses, with continuous assessment rather than acting as a gatekeeper that derails academic journeys. From the findings, respondents said, the integration of digital tools like CAD software is insufficient, despite their centrality to modern practice. The students also pointed to the need for

a more conducive and collaborative studio environment. They noted a lack of 24/7 access to a dedicated workspace, limited opportunity for peer learning, and poor safeguarding of student projects. Real-world experience, while touched on through industrial training, is seen as lacking depth. Students want chances to participate in the execution of real projects during or after their studies to better understand the practical implications of their work. In the context of global digitisation.

There are broader structural concerns too. Students called for a clearer, fairer and more adaptable grading system that reflects evolving trends in architecture, including digitalisation and sustainability. Furthermore, there is a call for more financial and material support for producing presentation materials, such as printed work and models.

4.4 Evaluation of the Teaching and Learning Facilities at the School

The study sought students' views in regard to the quality of the training facilities in the department.

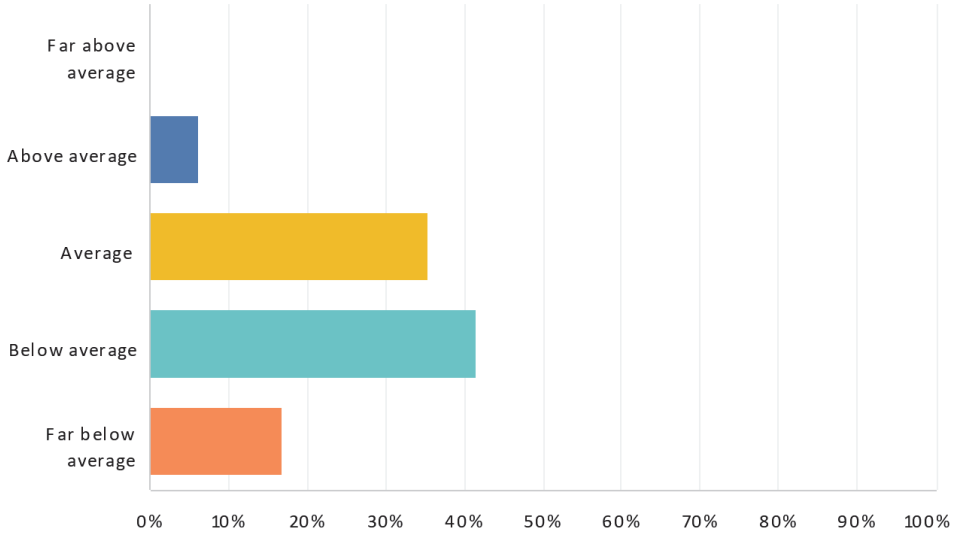

Figure 2. Evaluation of the Facilities at the School

Source: Primary Data

From the findings, most of the respondents said the facilities were below average (42%), 35% said the facilities were average while 18% said far below average. Architecture students mentioned an urgent need to boost physical facilities and learning resources to aid their training. A major concern is the lack of enough studio spaces, which were highlighted as being congested, without enough space to store students' class materials. There was also an agreement that studios need to be restructured and extended to better address the specific needs of architecture students. Students called for a committed and interesting environment with unlimited 24/7 access to boost efficiency and teamwork. Another major commendation is the putting up of well-furnished workshops and labs. These would include up-to-date computers with advanced visualisation proficiencies, 3D printers, laser cutters, and facilities for working with wood, metal, pottery, and paint. Such tools are seen as important for bridging the gap between conceptual design and hands-on execution

Many students emphasised the significance of model-making and fashioning workshops to supplement digital design work and improve practical skills. Students also called for a change from old-style printed presentations to digital formats, recommending the establishment of a devoted space for appraisals and exhibitions outside the main studio areas. Access to services such as printing, modelling, and laser cutting should be available within the school to simplify project implementation. There were also demands for the incorporation of design software from the first year to warrant early and reliable exposure to digital tools.

Lastly, students suggested increasing the number of lecturers to achieve a more effective lecturer-to-student ratio, to about 1:5, to guarantee personalised attention. The current staffing levels appear to limit this, leading to overworked tutors and under-supported students.

Some even recommended establishing an independent School of Architecture to create more purpose-built learning spaces. Overall, the feedback echoes a need for infrastructural investment to create a more inspiring, and practice-oriented study atmosphere for architecture students.

4.5 Student – Tutor Relationship at the Architecture School

The study sought to establish how the students and their tutors interact, which is a key contributor to academic excellence.

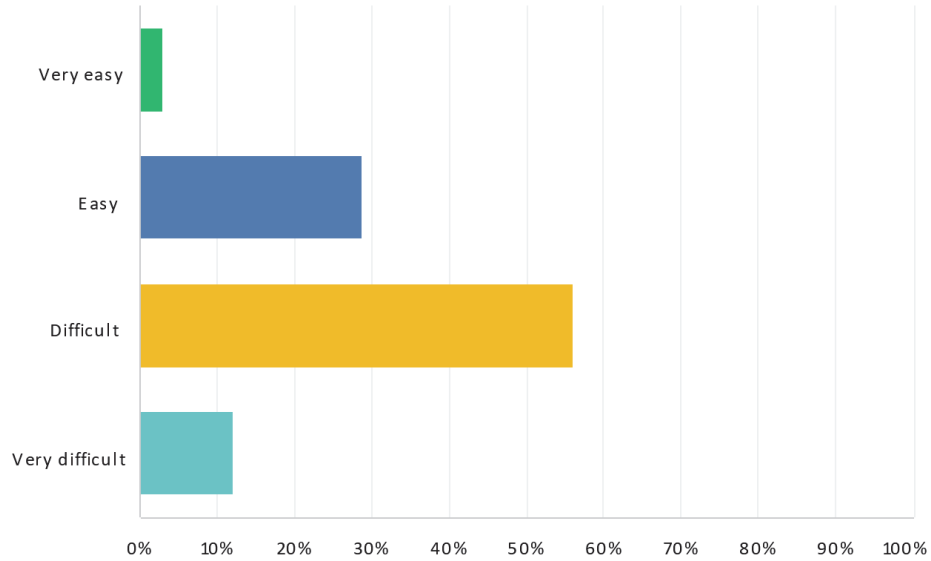

Figure 3. How Students Relate with Tutors

Source: Primary Data

Most of the respondents said the relationship with their tutors is difficult (55%), 12% said it is very difficult while 28% said it is easy and only 4% said it is very easy. From the interviews and discussions, students expressed serious concerns about the unapproachable relationships with their architecture lecturers. Many said the tutors were distant, and very critical, often acting more like judges than guides. This environment did not allow slow learners to seek help, leaving them disheartened and frightened of making errors that could lead to tough consequences, such as retake papers. The unpredictable presence of instructors on campus due to their outside professional obligations made it even harder for students to get the much-needed guidance. Arranging evaluations or getting comments was irregular, further increasing pressure and uncertainty.

The absence of counselling stretched beyond students, distressing their families who also felt the stress during exam seasons. Some students said that their bad experiences were so intense that they reconsidered undertaking further studies in architecture, despite having the finances or interest. Although some changes were observed, such as better social media collaboration, instructors were called to be more accessible, compassionate, and professional. Students highlighted the need for an atmosphere that promotes growth, nurtures open communication, and decreases the predominant fear of failure.

4.6 Likelihood of Recommending Someone to Study Architecture at Makerere

The study sought to establish the likelihood of students recommending newcomers to study architecture at Makerere.

Table 3. Likelihood of Recommending Someone to Study Architecture at Makerere

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Very likely	16.42%	11
Likely	29.85%	20
Neither likely nor unlikely	25.37%	16

Unlikely	17.91%	12
Very unlikely	10.45%	7
TOTAL		66

Source: Primary Data

The majority of the respondents (29.85%) said they were likely to recommend other students to study architecture at Makerere University. Another 16.42% said they were very likely. However, 25.37% were not decided, while another 28% said they were unlikely. This indicates a restrained level of contentment with the curriculum, while a substantial number are willing to approve it, the number is not tremendously high, which points to room for improvement. That almost half of the student body is either reluctant or unclear about recommending the programme indicates that the school is not meeting the expectations of an important percentage of its students.

From the qualitative responses, students voiced concern over the content and teaching of some course units, advocating for a curriculum that better combines theoretical training with practical architectural skills. They called for lessons that extend beyond academic exercises to encompass information on contracts, project pricing, and partnership with other professionals, which would organise them more efficiently for the realities of the profession.

Students also highlighted insensitive supervisors and a lack of structured, individual tutor sessions, which left them feeling not backed up. The big student-to-lecturer ratio was underlined as an obstacle to significant engagement, with some commending a maximum ratio of 1:5 to improve guidance and feedback. Respondents emphasised the need for committed, 24-hour studio spaces, better imaginative environments, and improved equipment to nurture invention and productivity. Moreover, students called for a robust orientation process for new arrivals to help them comprehend the anxieties of the course from the start. They also proposed more recurrent study outings and better acquaintance with international schools of architecture to widen their perceptions and stimulate creativity.

Teamwork was another repeated theme, with students advising the school to boost interaction with peers from other disciplines such as music, arts, industrial design, and product design. This, they argued, would supplement the learning experience and help students whose interests progress beyond old-style architectural practice.

A general issue that disheartens many students is the policy on full-year retakes, which was described as retributive and counterproductive. Restructuring such academic procedures to emphasise more on learning than punishment could improve self-confidence and create a more reassuring academic environment. Finally, several students pointed out that the school lacks flexible career paths. Some recognise halfway the program that their interests are somewhere else in the design field, yet the curriculum does not give room for a faster changeover into related disciplines. Introducing such options would prevent frustration and dropouts.

5. Discussions

From the findings, it was revealed that the five-year architectural programme at Makerere University has the highest psychological strain, which the respondents partly blamed on the uncertainty of anticipations, absence of organised academic changeover from high school, and the mental impact from many design refusals and retakes. The above findings are in agreement with previous studies that have indicated how architectural education is very challenging. Schon (1985) asserts that architectural training is rooted in a “reflective practice” model that necessitates students to advance creative judgment while engaging in iterative design processes. This learning style, according to Schon (1985), can be cognitively and emotionally draining if not well supported. In the same vein, Salama and Wilkinson (2007) assert that architecture schools often privilege design outcomes without sufficient attention to the learning processes, causing student frustration and burnout.

Most respondents suggested the curriculum should reflect up-to-date architectural practice with stress on factual projects and execution, not just design theory. This agrees with Salama (2005) who argues that architectural education must answer societal and technological change, appealing to institutions to go beyond static studio-based methods and adopt more rounded, integrative learning simulations. The respondents suggested that the school should offer counsel to students directly about their mental health, which emphasises the need to entrench emotional intelligence and student welfare into architectural teaching, which Webster (2008) says is a critical component in many design schools all over the world.

Respondents called for tutors to show superior emotional acumen and nurture a more compassionate, encouraging atmosphere to promote growth rather than fear. This agrees with Anthony (2002) and Dutton (1991) who criticised

the “studio culture” in architecture schools for fostering environments that prioritise performance over learning, often at the expense of students' well-being.

From the findings, the current policy requiring students who fail the portfolio to repeat an entire academic year is widely viewed as inhumane. This opposes the principle of formative assessment as advocated by Biggs and Tang (2007), which calls for ongoing feedback and adaptive learning strategies to help students progress rather than punish failure. Alternative suggestions like short-term remedial opportunities and holiday-based resubmissions reflect international best practices in competency-based education, where the focus is on mastery and timely feedback, not rigid timelines.

Many recommend introducing remedial opportunities during holidays to allow timely progression. Others argue that the portfolio should be treated like other design courses, with continuous assessment rather than acting as a gatekeeper that derails academic journeys. According to Salama (2015), flexible remedial frameworks can help reduce attrition rates and support deeper learning without penalising students for delays inherent in creative processes. Ochsner (2000) also suggests that architectural programs should balance rigour with empathy, allowing struggling students avenues to recover without delaying graduation unnecessarily.

From the findings, it was observed that the integration of digital tools like CAD software is insufficient. This is in line with Oxman (2006), who argues that failure to incorporate digital tools in architectural training can make graduates underprepared for practice, leading to a gap in skills gap. It was further revealed that students advocated for chances to take part in the execution of real projects during or after their studies to better understand the practical implications of their work. Oxman (2008) emphasises that digital literacy is foundational in architectural practice to prepare graduates for real-world demands.

The respondents questioned the university's grading system, which they said should reflect evolving trends in architecture, such as digitalisation and sustainability. Dannels (2005) highlights the divide between inflexible grading rubrics and the iterative nature of architectural design. The RIBA (2021) further appeals to institutes to update assessment methods to replicate the industry's sustainability requirements. There was an agreement that the school needs to redesign and expand studios so as to address the specific needs of architecture students. This request is in line with international appraisals by Salama (2005) and Olweny (2015) who assert that limited investment in architectural education directly affects student learning outcomes.

Students also called for a change from old-style printed presentations to digital ones. The respondents said design software should be integrated into teaching in the first year to ensure faster adoption of digital tools. These requests are in agreements with appeals by Oxman (2008) and Salama (2015) that hands-on work and digital construction tools are essential components of architectural education. Students called for more teaching staff to realise the appropriate lecturer-to-student ratio of 1:5, to ensure closer attention. Boyer & Mitgang (1996) explain that one-on-one assessment is important in skill development.

Some respondents called for the setting up of a detached School of Architecture to create more learning places. Olweny (2015) explains many architectural programmes in Sub-Saharan Africa are incorporated within facilities that do not give priority to the distinctive instructional needs of design education. Students were also concerns about the distant relationships with their architecture instructors, with many describing tutors as unapproachable and overly critical, rather than mentors. This environment demoralized many students and contributed to many retakes. This echoes international critiques of emotionally distant studio cultures, which pose serious pedagogical challenge within architectural education (Anthony, 1991; Webster, 2008). Nicol and Pilling (2000) assert that a learning environment that promotes punishment instead of formative feedback separates students and corrodes motivation.

Close half of the students at the architectural school are unwilling to recommend the programme to others, implying that the school is not fulfilling the expectations of some of its students. Nicol & Pilling (2000) assert that in architectural education, student-centered learning and practical relevance are very important and should be emphasised. Students voiced unease over the content and conveyance of some course units, calling for lessons that do more than course exercises to include knowledge on contracts, project pricing, and collaboration with other professionals, which would get them ready for the actualities of the profession. This aligns with assessments by Salama (2005) that architectural education must go beyond theoretical concept to prepare students for the socio-economic realities of professional practice.

The teaching and mentorship methods were brought out, with many students mentioning unresponsive supervisors, which left them feeling abandoned. As Schön (1983) asserts, architectural training is much dependent on insightful dialogue between tutor and student. . The respondents also called for dedicated, fulltime studio spaces to promote

invention and productivity. Anthony's (1991) asserts that in architectural studio culture, many students are not well unsupported, which leaves them isolated and affect retention and psychological well-being.

There was a call for emphasis on more orientation for new students to help them appreciate the demands of the course from the start. They also called for more regular study tours and exposure to international schools of architecture to widen their perceptions and stimulate creativity. Webster (2006) says the above is necessary given that architecture programmes have high workload and long hours. Webster (2006) adds that early orientation could decrease abrasion, help students plan better, and promote resilience. There was a call for more collaboration and interaction between the architecture school students with those from other disciplines like arts, industrial design, and product design. This, they claimed, would augment the learning know-how and address needs of students whose interests develop beyond traditional architectural practice. This is backed by Salama & Wilkinson (2007) who argue that open-minded institutions promote modular transitions across design disciplines.

Many students are demoralised by the policy on full-year retakes, which they view as punitive and counterproductive. They said such policy should be reformed to focus more on learning and improve morale. It was also observed that the school lacks flexible career paths, which leads to frustration and dropouts. Feldon et al. (2013) argue that developmental response and learning-oriented assessment are more effective than punishment-driven policies. Reforming these guidelines would not only improve confidence but also promote a healthier academic culture.

6. Conclusions

This study sought to explore student's experiences on five-year programme Architectural program at Makerere University. The findings reveal a complex and challenging experience for architecture students at Makerere University, characterised by significant academic and psychological demands throughout the five-year programme. A majority of respondents describe the course as difficult, underscoring the intense workload, unclear academic expectations, and the emotional strain caused by harsh critique and punitive retake policies. These factors contribute to high stress levels and highlight a gap in the structured transition from high school to architectural education.

While nearly half of the students acknowledge that the subjects taught are somewhat useful and relevant to practice, there remains a strong call for curriculum reform. Graduates advocate for a more practical, integrated approach that combines theoretical knowledge with real-world skills, including contract management, project costing, digital design tools, and collaborative interdisciplinary learning. This echoes global educational critiques urging architecture programmes to align more closely with contemporary professional practice and technological advancements.

The physical and resource environment is identified as a critical barrier to student success. Inadequate studio spaces, lack of fulltime access, insufficient workshops, and outdated equipment limit hands-on learning and innovation. Students strongly recommend infrastructural upgrades, including dedicated workshops, digital fabrication facilities, and a more supportive, practice-oriented environment.

Equally concerning are the strained relationships between students and tutors, with over half describing these as difficult or very difficult. A culture of intimidation, inconsistent feedback, and a punitive approach to assessment foster fear and undermine student confidence and creativity. Students call for more approachable, empathetic mentorship, smaller lecturer-to-student ratios, and a shift towards formative feedback to nurture growth rather than punish failure.

Recommendations

Firstly, the curriculum should be revised to achieve a better balance between theoretical knowledge and practical skills. This includes incorporating real-world architectural competencies such as contract management, project costing, and interdisciplinary collaboration, alongside enhanced training in digital tools like CAD and BIM. Practical, project-based learning with real clients and industry internships should be emphasized to prepare students for professional practice. Secondly, there is a critical need to improve mentorship and tutor engagement. Reducing the student-to-lecturer ratio to around 1:5 would allow for more personalised guidance and effective one-on-one sessions. Tutors should receive training in emotional intelligence and constructive feedback methods to foster a supportive learning environment. Consistent tutor presence and transparent, timely communication of assessment criteria and results will also help reduce student anxiety and confusion.

Infrastructural improvements are equally important. Upgrading and expanding studio spaces to provide dedicated, 24/7 accessible work environments will encourage creativity and collaboration. The establishment of well-equipped workshops and digital fabrication labs, including 3D printers, laser cutters, and materials workshops, is

necessary to complement conceptual learning with hands-on practice. Digital design software should be integrated into the curriculum from the first year to build essential digital literacy. Academic policies should be reformed to focus more on student progression and well-being. Specifically, the punitive full-year retake policy should be replaced with shorter remedial opportunities and continuous portfolio assessments. Introducing mental health support services, such as a resident counsellor, would help students manage the psychological demands of architectural education.

Additionally, orientation programmes for first-year students should be strengthened to clearly communicate academic expectations and ease the transition from high school. Exposure to broader architectural perspectives through study tours, workshops, and guest lectures, including collaborations with international architecture schools, would inspire creativity and innovation. Encouraging interdisciplinary engagement with fields such as industrial design and fine arts can enrich the educational experience. Finally, institutional development should be considered, including the possibility of establishing a standalone School of Architecture to better meet the specific pedagogical and infrastructural needs of the programme. Increased funding and stronger industry partnerships are essential for sustained improvements, ensuring that the curriculum remains relevant and graduates are well-prepared for contemporary architectural practice.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the study participants who generously shared their time and insights.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

Akinmoladun, O. I., & Oluwoye, J. O. (2007). An assessment of why the problems of housing shortages persist in developing countries: A case study of Lagos Metropolis, Nigeria. *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences*, *4*(4), 589–598.

Akinmoladun, O., Odongo, A. O., & Ssekamatte, I. M. (2020). Reforming architectural education in Africa: The case of Makerere University. *International Journal of Architectural Education and Practice*.

Allu, E. L. A., & Ebohon, O. J. (2015). Assessing the knowledge and awareness level of built environment professionals in Nigeria. *International Journal of Contemporary Applied Sciences*, *2*(5), 77–95.

Anthony, K. H. (1991). *Design juries on trial: The renaissance of the design studio*. Van Nostrand Reinhold.

Atwal, P., Morton, P., & Watts, N. (2007). Mentoring in built environment higher education courses. In D. Boyd (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 23rd Annual ARCOM Conference* (pp. 335–343). Association of Researchers in Construction Management.

Baker, N., & Steemers, K. (2003). *Energy and environment in architecture: A technical design guide*. E & FN Spon.

Biggs, J., & Tang, C. (2011). *Teaching for quality learning at university* (4th ed.). Open University Press.

Boyer, E. L., & Mitgang, L. D. (1996). *Building community: A new future for architecture education and practice*. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

Chandavarkar, P. (2018). Architecture education: A roadmap to reform. *Matter*.

Cuff, D. (1991). *Architecture: The story of practice*. MIT Press.

Dutton, T. A. (1987). Design and studio pedagogy. *Journal of Architectural Education*, *41*(1), 16–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/10464883.1987.10758461

Dutton, T. A. (1991). Design and studio pedagogy. In T. A. Dutton (Ed.), *Voices in architectural education* (pp. 165–194). Bergin & Garvey.

Dutton, T. A., & Hutton, L. (1998). *Architectural knowledge: The idea of a profession*. E & FN Spon.

Ebohon, O. J., Taki, A. H., & Allu, E. L. A. (2013). Sustainable agenda: Challenges of mitigation and adaptation in the Nigerian built environment. In *Proceedings of the Architects Registration Council of Nigeria ARCON 6th Architects Colloquium* (pp. 150–173). Abuja, Nigeria.

Feldon, D. F., Timmerman, B. E. C., Stowe, K. A., & Showman, R. (2013). Understanding the impact of feedback and revision in learning. *Educational Psychologist*, *48*(2), 86–97. https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2013.769232

Ford, K. (2014). *Competency-based education: History, opportunities, and challenges*. Center for Innovation in Learning and Student Success (CILSS).

Gero, J. S., & Tversky, B. (2013). The role of drawing in design thinking. *Design Studies*, *34*(6), 652–669. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.destud.2013.03.004

Gibbs, G., & Simpson, C. (2004). Conditions under which assessment supports students' learning. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*, *1*, 3–31.

Günther, J. (2017). The importance of interdisciplinary learning in architectural education. *Journal of Architecture and Urbanism*, *41*(3), 123–134. https://doi.org/10.3846/20297955.2017.1353459

Khan, H., & Khan, S. (2019). Nemesis in the genesis: Reforming architectural education in India. *New Design Ideas*, *3*(2), 148–153.

Kohale, N., Kini, P., & Mohammed, C. (2024). Relevance of competency-based education for architectural education in India. *F1000Research*, *13*, 835. https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.148617.2

Kuh, G. D. (2008). *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*. Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Lema, Z. (2012). Assessing the role of Makerere University in shaping sustainable architecture in Uganda. *Journal of Environmental Sustainability Studies*, *10*(2), 23–29.

Liu, Y., Boud, D., & Walker, D. (2019). A review of design education: From practice to theory and back. *Design Studies*, *62*, 18–34. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.destud.2019.04.001

Makerere University. (2017). *Fact book 2017–2018*. Makerere University.

Mehta, J. (2006). Architectural education in India. *Architectural Science Review*, *21*(1–2), 35–37.

Mohamad Tajuddin Haji Mohamad Rasdi. (2003). Democracy and architecture education: The 'Wright' perspective. In *Forum: Towards a Global Perspective of Architecture Education*. KALAM-Dept. of Architecture, UTM, Skudai.

Mulumba, S. S. (1988). Need for educational change. *NIA Journal*, *4*, 8–9.

Ngara, C. (2007). African ways of knowing and pedagogy revisited. *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education*, *2*(2), 7–21.

Nicol, D., & Pilling, S. (2000). *Changing architectural education: Towards a new professionalism*. Taylor & Francis.

Olweny, M. R. O., & Nshemereirwe, C. V. (2006). Educating built environment professionals: Perspectives from Uganda. *Built Environment Education Annual Conference (BEECON)*, London.

Oxman, R. (2010). Digital architecture as a challenge for design pedagogy: Theory, knowledge, models, and media in design education. *Design Studies*, *31*(3), 288–314. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.destud.2009.12.004

Pallasmaa, J. (2012). *The eyes of the skin: Architecture and the senses* (2nd ed.). John Wiley & Sons.

Pido, J. P. O. (2002). Mismatch in design education at the University of Nairobi. *Art - Design – Education - Exchange with Africa Seminar*, Department of Art Education, University of Art and Design, Helsinki, 20–29.

Pons-Valladares, O., Hosseini, S. M. A., & Franquesa, J. (2022). Innovative approach to assist architecture teachers in choosing practical sessions. *Sustainability*, *14*(12), 7081. https://doi.org/10.3390/su14127081

Salama, A. M. (2005). A process-oriented design pedagogy: KFUPM sophomore studio. *Open House International*, *30*(3), 60–70.

Salama, A. M., & Wilkinson, N. (2007). *Design studio pedagogy: Horizons for the future*. The Urban International Press.

Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner*. Basic Books.

Schön, D. A. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner: Toward a new design for teaching and learning in the professions*. Jossey-Bass.

Shittu, A. A., Kolios, A., Hart, P., Amirafshari, P., & Mehmanparast, A. (2020). A systematic review of structural reliability analysis methods with applicability to the design of complex offshore structures. *Under review*.

Tucker, D. (2013). Diversity and architecture: The challenge of inclusive education. *Journal of Architectural Education*, *67*(2), 119–126. https://doi.org/10.1080/10464883.2013.783040

Webster, H. (2006). Power, freedom and resistance: Excavating the design jury. *International Journal of Art & Design Education*, *25*(3), 286–296.

Yu Qin, & Wang, T. (2020). Teaching reform and exploration of architectural design course under the training of innovative talents. *International Conference on Mental Health and Humanities Education (ICMHHE 2020)*.

Zahari Ishak. (2006). Psikologi pendidikan: Realiti pengajaran dan pembelajaran [Educational psychology: Reality of teaching and learning]. *Masalah Pendidikan*, *29*, 27–36.