

**Royal Institute of British Architects**

**Report of the RIBA Visiting Board  
to Cardiff University**

Confirmed by RIBA Education Committee on 26 November 2008

**Welsh School of Architecture**

**BSc (Hons) Architecture (Part One)**

**M.Arch (Part Two)**

**Diploma/MA in Professional Studies (Part  
Three)**

Date of Visiting Board: 6-7 March 2008

## 1. Information About the Courses

### 1.1 Courses offered for revalidation:

BSc (Hons) Architecture (Part One) – 3 years full time  
M.Arch (Part Two) – 2 years (the first year of which is the Year in Practice)  
Diploma/MA in Professional Studies (Part Three)

### 1.2 Address of the Institution where the courses are delivered

The Welsh School of Architecture  
Cardiff University  
Bute Building  
King Edward VII Avenue  
Cardiff CF1 3NB

T: (+44) 029 20874430

F:

W: <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/archi/>

### 1.3 Name of Awarding Body

Cardiff University

### 1.4 Name of Head of School

Professor Philip Jones

## 2. Membership of the Visiting Board

### 2.1 The members of the RIBA Visiting Board for the visit on 6-7 March 2008 were:

Professor Jim Low (Chair)  
Peter Beacock (Vice Chair)  
Elspeth Clements  
Lindesay Dawe

Sheila Ryding, Co-Professional Member  
Roxanne Walters, Graduate/Student Member  
Jonathan Jones, RSAW representative

Stephanie Beasley-Suffolk (RIBA) was in attendance as Secretary to the Board.

## 3. Procedures & Criteria for the Visit

3.1 The Visiting Board was carried out under the 'RIBA Procedures for the Validation of UK Courses and Examinations in Architecture,' published July 2003, effective from September 2003, 'Tomorrow's Architect,' published March 2003, effective from September 2003, and 'Description & Regulations for the recognition of courses, programmes and examinations in Professional Practice and Management, (Part 3) in the UK. For more information see [www.architecture.com](http://www.architecture.com).

## 4. Recommendations of the Visiting Board Confirmed by the Royal Institute of British Architects Education Committee 26 November 2008

4.1 At its meeting on 26 November 2008 the RIBA Education Committee confirmed:

BSc (Hons) Architecture (Part One)  
M.Arch (Part Two)  
Diploma/MA in Professional Studies (Part Three)

4.2 The next Visiting Board will take place in 2012.

## **5. Recommendation of the Visiting Board to the Commonwealth Association of Architects and the Construction Industry Council & EU Directive**

- 5.1 The Visiting Board recommends to the Commonwealth Association of Architects that the CAA continue with their accreditation of the Part Two qualification.
- 5.2 The Visiting Board was satisfied that the Part One courses met the Construction Industry Council Common Learning Outcomes for Degree Courses in the Built Environment
- 5.3 The Visiting Board recommends to ARB that the Part 1 & 2 courses met all points of the EU Directive.

## **6. Criteria for Validation**

- 6.1 On the basis of the sample of academic portfolios examined, the Visiting Board was satisfied that all the students graduating from the courses and examinations listed in 4.1 above satisfied all the Criteria for Validation (which are held in common by the RIBA for validation and the ARB for prescription).

## **7. Standards**

- 7.1 On the basis of the sample of academic portfolios examined, the work from the previous year of the courses listed in 4.1 was inspected during the visit and was found to meet the required standards.

## **8. Conditions of Validation**

- 8.1 There were no conditions attached to the courses listed in 4.1.

## **9. Standard Requirements of Recognition**

- 9.1 RIBA recognition of all courses/qualifications is dependent upon:
- i. external examiners being appointed for the course;
  - ii. any significant changes to the courses and examinations being submitted to the RIBA;
  - iii. any change of award title, and the effective date of the change, being reported to the RIBA so that, where appropriate, recognition may formally be transferred to the new title by the RIBA;
  - iv. submission to the RIBA of the names of students passing the courses/qualifications listed in 4.

## **10. Summary of the Recommendations, Advice & Commentary Contained in the Full Report**

- 10.1 The WSA is a thriving school with a strong, well-established track record in research and teaching and commitment to preserve and enhance this. The School prides itself on its ethos, vibrant atmosphere and good relationships between the various groups. It enjoys great commitment and support at institutional level, being seen as one of the flagship schools of the University. It is thoroughly and proactively engaged with its location in Cardiff and the wider region. At the high end of achievement, students produce excellent work.

- 10.2 The School's strengths include:
- The calibre of students attracted to the school, some through its innovative outreach activities.
  - Committed and enthusiastic staff body
  - The quality of the facilities, which are used to best advantage although increasingly under pressure.
  - The commitment to the School by University senior management
  - The Architecture Library, not only its excellent collection but also its location within the School, providing an invaluable and immediately accessible resource for students, teachers and researchers.
  - Links with practice
  - The School's positive response to the unique course structure dictated by the funding regime (funding 4.5 years of study, hence the Academic Year in Practice). This has worked successfully for many years and is constantly improving.
  - The exceptional level of support for students in practice, particularly post Part Two.
  - Research activities and the way in which they inform the validated courses.
  - Its location in a capital city in which it has developed an active role for itself forging links with community, practice and government.
- 10.3 Recommendations
- The Visiting Board has made the following recommendations. The RIBA expects the Institution to report on action taken or planned as a result of the recommendations in the annual monitoring returns submitted by the school and in the mid term review. Failure by an Institution to act on recommendations may

result in a course being conditioned by a future Visiting Board.

- 10.3.1 The Board recommends that the Part Three External Examiner observes at least a sample of the Professional Oral Examinations. While the Board was content that threshold standards were appropriate and parity was achieved, it believes that such a measure would act as reassurance that this continues to be the case.

#### 10.4 Advice

- 10.4.1 The Visiting Board offers the following advice to the Institution on desirable, but not essential improvements, which it is felt would assist course development and/or raise standards:

- 10.4.1 The Board notes and welcomes the School's positive actions regarding the teaching of CAD. Nonetheless the Board advises the School to take care not to compromise the high standards of hand-drawing skills achieved by the students.

- 10.4.2 The Board advises the School to take advantage of the full range of marks available at Part One.

## 11. Summary of Previous Visiting Board Reports

- 11.1 The last RIBA Visiting Board to the Cardiff University took place on 2-3 March 2004. The Board recommended that Continued Validation be granted to:

**Bachelor of Science with Honours (Architectural Studies),** three years full-time (Part One)

**Bachelor of Architecture**, two years full-time (the first year of which is undertaken as 'Education in Practice') – Part Two

**Welsh School of Architecture/Royal Society of Architects in Wales, Examination in Professional Practice**, part-time, taken after three years in practical training, Part Three

11.2 Summary of 2004 Visiting Board Report

“The School had responded appropriately to the issues raised by the previous Visiting Board. A fully modularised structure has been introduced for the first "Education in Practice" year of the BArch and the design work in year of the BArch strengthened. Issues regarding the constitution, ownership and quality assurance of the Part Three course have been fully resolved. The School continues to develop the Part Three which has now been internally validated within a Diploma/MA framework.

“The School's strengths include:

- a highly committed staff team that successfully balance research excellence with their commitments to student teaching
- excellent accommodation including some very well-equipped specialist laboratories and impressive library facilities
- a strong commitment to social responsibility with many design projects being undertaken for real clients.

“Recommendations

“The record which students maintain of their experiences during the "Education in Practice" year should not be via the PEDR system, but in a document clearly linked to the

learning outcomes for the year which is separate and additional to the PEDR record.

“The School should either restructure its Part Three Exam Papers or formalise the process via which it ensures that the Professional Interview addresses topics not covered in exams to be able to more clearly demonstrate that all successful candidates meet all Part Three Validation Criteria.

“The School should reconsider the assessment procedures that are used in connection with the 80 credit Architectural Design module in all years of the BSc and the final year of the BArch. Final assessment is made by reference to a display which normally includes all work that constitutes the various elements of the 80 credit design modules. Given the scope of work being finally assessed in this way, tracking and documentation of all the interim assessments should be developed to allow a clear demonstration that the learning outcomes for this module are being met by all students passing the module.

“Advice

“Although the School has substantially addressed issues raised by the previous Visiting Board regarding the fourth "Education in Practice" year, the Board advises that further attention might be given to strengthening design work during that year and providing a better linkage to the following year to provide stronger support for design in the final year of the BArch course. The Board recognises that due to the compression of the Part Two educational experience at Cardiff, the space available for exploratory and experimental design work is restricted and only the most able students exhibit development work of this nature. The School should continue to examine how it

might encourage all students to widen their design agendas at some stage during the Part Two course.

“The School needs to carefully examine its student recruitment and space utilisation strategy if the excellent studio culture, which is such a strength of the School, is not to be put at risk by the demand for additional space for researchers. The Board recognises that support may well be needed from the University to resolve the potentially conflicting pressures.

“The Board acknowledged that the School is making clear efforts to improve its support of students in developing skills in the use of computers as design tools. In implementing the policy it has established, the Board advises the School to incorporate safeguards for students who cannot afford to purchase laptops.

“The Board understands the structural reasons why the School admits only limited numbers of graduates from other schools to its Part Two programme, however this means that the programme misses the enriching contribution of incoming students from other schools with differing Part One experiences. The Board believes that the School has a particular market opportunity here, based on the development of its MPhil programme and would advise the School that this could be an important component of its aspiration to achieve international standing.

“The Board was very impressed by the excellent work being undertaken in the history and theory areas, and advises the School that this can be further enhanced by investigating ways in which issues of cultural context

might more clearly influence design outcomes at both Part One and Part Two levels.”

## 12. Details of the Conditions in Item 8.

12.1 There were no conditions attached to the courses listed in 4.1.

## 13. Commentary

### 13.1 Self-Appraisal and Developments since the last visit

The Critical Self-Appraisal informative and helpful although not particularly self-critical.

Extensive improvements have been made to provide student accommodation with the introduction of mezzanine floors in the studios to provide additional space. The School has also acquired a new workshop and appointed a specialist technician. There are some outstanding issues with space and IT provision of which the University is aware and discussions are ongoing about future development.

A significant number of staff appointments have been made at all levels up to professorial, each post having responsibilities for teaching and research. The Board was pleased to note one appointment made specifically to strengthen Information Technology both as teaching and research. New staff have been well received by the students.

The Part Two programme award has been recast as an Integrated Masters and renamed M.Arch in recognition of the Masters level content of the second year. In addition to this, the School has also developed a suite of masters' courses directly linked to its extensive and successful research activities. Development of the graduate courses

and research activities is seen as essential to the School's ambition to be an international school of architecture.

No major changes are planned at undergraduate level in the foreseeable future. The University's policy, across all disciplines, is to expand at postgraduate level and will not increase numbers at undergraduate level. The School believes it is doing well in attracting students of high calibre and it is content with the size of the School. Staff believe that the structure of the course relies on the relationships between staff and students made possible by the healthy staff:student ratio.

The School continues to develop its close links with government and the profession, often acting in an advisory capacity. It is one of the most successful schools in the University in terms of widening participation engagement, to the extent that it advises the Welsh Assembly, local government and city government.

### 13.2 **Documentation and Arrangements for the Visit**

Overall the arrangements were excellent and the Board thanks the School, including staff and students, for their generous hospitality. The Board also thanks the courteous and hospitable students who showed them around the School. Staff were helpful and communicative, providing rapid responses to requests for further information and assistance. This is indicative of the high level of organisation and administrative management in the School. However, the documentation was sent to the Board rather late which gave the Board little time in which fully to digest a complexly laid-out set of documents. The documentation was comprehensive but was not easy to navigate.

The exhibition was extensive and well laid out, giving a clear and full picture of the student experience. This was accompanied by clear and concise explanations from members of staff. The staff's technique of providing clear profiles of student work was greatly appreciated by the Board.

The School provided complete academic portfolios, which were well laid out and clearly labelled. The work was easy to navigate and staff provided helpful assistance when necessary. The Board appreciated the range and amount of models that were provided in the Base Room.

#### 13.2.1 *Record of Academic Portfolios sampled during the visit*

The Board viewed the work of the 2007 graduating cohorts.

##### **BSc (Hons) Architectural Studies, Part One**

Year One: 3 lowest, 2 middle, 2 high from a cohort of 75  
Year Two: 3 lowest, 2 middle, 2 high from a cohort of 54  
Year Three: 3 lowest, 2 middle, 2 high from a cohort of 66.

##### **M.Arch (Part Two)**

Year Two: 3 lowest, 2 middle, 2 high from a cohort of 31.  
These included students' work from the academic year in practice.

##### **Diploma/MA in Professional Studies (Part Three.**

presume 3 lowest, 2 middle and 2 high from a cohort of 9.

#### 13.3 **Responses made to the previous Visiting Board report (and to reports of any revisits) and external examiner comments.**

The Board was pleased to note that the School had considered seriously and addressed the recommendations of the 2004 Visiting Board. These responses are covered in the relevant sections of the present report. The School

responds seriously and conscientiously to External Examiners' reports, as evident from the tenor of responses.

**13.4 Context of the courses within the wider provision of the school and Faculty.**

The Welsh School of Architecture operates as a stand-alone school within the structure of Cardiff University with devolved management and budgetary responsibilities. In addition to the professionally validated programmes of architecture, the School offers a growing suite of masters courses. At present these include MSc in Environmental Designs of Buildings, MA in Urban Design (in collaboration with the School of City and Regional Planning), MSc in Building Energy and Environment Performance Modelling, MSc Theory and Practice of Sustainable Design, MSc in Sustainable Energy and Environment (in collaboration with the School of Engineering) and an MPhil in Architecture and Urban Design. The School is also home to a wide range of research centres and groups which include the Architectural Science Group (ASG), Architectural History and Theory Group (AHTG), Centre for Research in the Built Environment (CRiBE), Design Research Unit Wales (DRUw), Centre for Education in the Built Environment (CEBE), Centre for Sustainable Design of the Built Environment (SuDOBE), Wales Energy Research Centre (WERC), Low Carbon Research Institute (LCRI), Practice, Research and Advancement in South Asian Design and Architecture (PRASADA). This offers tremendous opportunity for innovative research directly to influence architecture programme at all levels, both academically and in terms of facilities, of which the School readily takes advantage.

**13.5 Detailed Commentary on the Course leading to Part One qualification**

13.5.1 Clarity, validity and achievement of course objectives  
These were clearly outlined in the programme handbooks and demonstrably being achieved. The Board had found the programme and progression descriptions in the specifications confusing but programme structure diagrams and explanations provided at the Exhibition clarified this helpfully.

13.5.2 Course design and content

The Part One course at the Welsh School of Architecture is a year-based programme on a modular framework. The BSc (Hons) programme is an intensive course and the students are ambitious.

The Board was particularly impressed by the reflective sketchbook in the second year, in which students are expected to reflect on the studio projects they have done or are currently engaged in. This was considered exemplary practice by the University and the School has been awarded funding to develop this.

In the next academic session the School was intending to introduce a third term studio, jointly taken by first and second years, which would be related to research activities. The Board commends the principle of this and looks forward to learning how it develops in practice. The students were also excited by this development and the opportunities it would bring.

13.5.3 Quality and coverage of the syllabus

- *Design*

On the basis of the sample of portfolios provided, the Visiting Board confirms that all graduates of the BSc

(Hons) Architectural Studies programme met all Part One criteria in the area of Design.

This programme has a proven track record of student achievement. The course focuses on making, exploring and demonstrating outcomes through the use of models. This approach is applied from the beginning of the Part One programme and continues through the five years of the Part One and Two. Communication work is carefully constructed. Design projects were appropriate. Students are given untutored 'primer' projects to do in vacations in order to prepare them for the main project. The students appreciated this approach.

The students' design work is of a consistent quality, which is evident at lowest pass stage and outstanding at the higher level of achievement. The quality of students' site appraisals can be variable.

- *Technology & Environment*

On the basis of the sample of portfolios provided, the Visiting Board confirms that all graduates of the BSc (Hons) Architectural Studies programme met all Part One criteria in the area of Technology and Environment.

Much of the students' activities in this area take the form of research. The School is achieving integration of technology and design and the Board encourages the School to ensure that the module structure facilitates this.

Students' work is well informed by research. There is evidence of a research-led sustainability approach within the course. Students use Ecotect from the second year and the Board believes that although work is quite advanced at this level, it might be introduced too early in the

programme for the full benefits to be realised. The Board believes that the School should continue to monitor this to ensure that students are absorbing and applying it.

- *Cultural Context*

On the basis of the sample of portfolios provided, the Visiting Board confirms that all graduates of the BSc (Hons) Architectural Studies programme met all Part One criteria in the area of Cultural Context.

The 2004 Board was very impressed by the excellent work being undertaken in the history and theory areas, and advised the School that this can be further enhanced by investigating ways in which issues of cultural context might more clearly influence design outcomes at both Part One and Part Two levels. The School has acted upon this by introducing a lecture programme based on the School's research. Students are asked to undertake projects based on this programme. The synthesis emerges as students progress through the programme and the evidence is apparent in undergraduate work.

The Board considered that cultural context teaching and students' work displays all the evidence of being thoroughly research-led. In the first and second year cultural context is explored through model making. Following a lecture students then make models to explore iconic buildings. Students also study vernacular architecture and this element of the course is linked to architectural design, providing a unique opportunity for students. Despite this, the Board had reservations about whether the disappointment voiced by the last Board (March 2004) about precedent studies had been adequately addressed, agreeing that it is not overtly evident in the work.

- *Communication*

On the basis of the sample of portfolios provided, the Visiting Board confirms that all graduates of the BSc (Hons) Architectural Studies programme met all Part One criteria in the area of Communication.

The School continues to maintain high standards in a good range of communication skills which are developed to a high level. The range remains traditional but provides a good grounding and base from which to develop. The School believes firmly in encouraging students to draw and to develop their visual and drawing skills before embarking on using CAD. The issue of CAD and IT was mentioned frequently in the advance programme documentation from school, students and External Examiners. The Board was therefore interested in exploring this with staff and students. However, the Board found that students expressed few concerns over CAD whether used as a draughting or design tool. The School is dealing with this in a very pragmatic way, teaching CAD formally with an emphasis on output and equipment and systems have been put in place to provide opportunities for students to use CAD. The Board noted that students are using digital imagery and concluded that this was not as great an issue as might have been inferred from the documentation. Nonetheless the Board advises the School to take care not to compromise the high standards of drawing skills achieved by the students. The students appreciate being taught to draw and to develop a high level of skill. Some graphical headings detracted from otherwise excellent communication skills.

Students proved themselves to be highly articulate in an enjoyable meeting with the Board.

- *Management Practice & Law*

On the basis of the sample of portfolios provided, the Visiting Board confirms that all graduates of the BSc (Hons) Architectural Studies programme met all Part One criteria in the area of Management, Practice and Law.

This is assessed through course work and an examination. The Board considered that this aspect of the course was challenging.

- *Preparation for the Academic Year in Practice*

Students are prepared for this during the third year. At a special careers day visitors are invited to share their experiences of being in various types of practice. The School does not find employment for students but maintains a database of contacts and tutors advise them which offices might be interesting for them. Students also benefit from the strong links with practice when seeking employment.

13.5.4 Progression within the course

The Board noted that progression was particularly good. This reflects the quality of the student intake, cohort sizes and staff support.

13.5.5 Assessment:

The School employs a range of assessment methods including formal written examinations, class tests and coursework. Feedback systems are thorough and helpful. Students achieve high standards and Board advises the School to take advantage of the full range of marks. The Board was reassured that appropriate systems existed within the University regulatory framework to ensure that validation criteria were safeguarded. Compensation is not

permitted. Essays were correctly structured and referenced, which reflects the School's extensive research activities and the influence these have on taught programmes.

The School has also complied with the 2004 Board's recommendation regarding the 80 credit Architectural Design module in all years of the BSc and the final year of the BArch (now M.Arch). The School has now introduced written formative feedback by staff in the formative assessment. This has been welcomed by the students. It is evident that students receive the feedback in time to feed into their design work.

13.5.6 Admissions and arrangements for direct entry at a stage other than the start of the course

The School is committed to broadening access for talented students. The standard offer is 3 As at A level but there is some flexibility to admit promising students who may not achieve these grades. The Board was encouraged to hear that the School, supported by the University, is forming links with schools in the community. Good A level Art grades are required and the School realises that it is not possible for some schools to support this high level of achievement. Candidates are therefore invited to the School in order to be assessed on capability, aptitude and visual skills. The School also considers GCSE grades as these offer a good cross section of ability

The size of UK intake is capped at 65 in accordance with the University's policy on undergraduate admissions.

13.6 **Detailed Commentary on the Course leading to Part Two qualification**

13.6.1 Clarity, validity and achievement of course objectives  
The course objectives as outlined in the programme specifications were clear and valid and demonstrably being achieved.

13.6.2 Course design and content  
The School maintains the unique structure of the Part Two course which is dictated by the fact that the School receives funding for 4.5 years of study from the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW). The fourth year of the M.Arch programme (first year of the Part Two) is spent in practice. This has been refined and tightened up over the years and is now more structured, giving students a clearer framework.

Design work is now set during the fourth year to ensure that students can maintain and develop their skills in this area. Work is assessed during the short, intensive courses which take place three times during the year (in September, February and July). The Board noted during the student meeting that many students seem to be unsure about how the programme works in practice, but that ultimately it offers a successful model.

Students may undertake their placement anywhere in the world. At the time of the visit, 30% were based in London, 30% in Wales and the rest elsewhere in the world. The Board was impressed that all students, regardless of geographical location, are visited during the Academic Year in Practice by a representative of the School. This is greatly appreciated by students. If a member of staff is unavailable, other arrangements were made. In one instance a member of staff travelled to Australia to deliver the course for a group of students in conjunction with the University of Sydney.

The students clearly recognise the value of the year in practice and its wider benefits. The academic tasks and exercises set enabled them to benefit more from the time in practice even if the work given them by the practices was somewhat limited in scope, as had been some students' experience. The School realises the importance of keeping in touch with students and minimising the gap to lessen any sense of isolation. The School does believe that the gap between the students and the school can possibly constrain what they are trying to attempt. Contact is maintained in between the short courses by the visits and email. The School is also introducing distance-learning techniques using Blackboard to support the work-based learning exercises.

The School is aware that it has little control over students' experience in practice. The University has a Code of Practice regarding study away from the University, which is generic and is concerned with minimum expectations. Additionally, each school individually is expected to have more detailed arrangements in place for particular subjects. There are also opportunities for in-house placements through the project office.

The School tries to ensure that progress for students is tailored, monitored and supported and that they have the full suite of technical requirements covered in the written work.

Students then return for a full, intensive academic year in year 5 (the second year of Part Two). Students enjoy and appreciate the experience despite its intensity. As well as providing a challenging experience it also lessens the financial burden for students. An increasing number of

fifth year students are being given fifth year bursaries from their practices.

The programme is still year-based but the School wishes to capitalise on the presence of research specialists and therefore runs a series of thematic units from which students can elect and select final design projects. At the time of the visit 8 thematic studios were offered, linked with ongoing and established research interests within the school.

The Board considered that within this system students achieve a high standard by the end of the second year and may indeed reach this standard in the fifth year alone.

### 13.6.3 Quality and coverage of the syllabus

#### - *Design*

On the basis of the sample of portfolios provided, the Visiting Board confirms that all graduates of the MArch programme met all Part Two criteria in the area of Design.

At the highest levels of achievement, student work was superb and, at the lower end, of an appropriate standard. At the higher end there was some inspired and poetic work. Students have the skills, talent and support to enable the high-end students to achieve their full potential. This potential is nurtured by the high calibre of visiting professors and critics.

Although schools are not required to act on advice, the present Board was pleased to note that the School had considered and acted upon the advice offered by the 2004 Visiting Board with regard to strengthening design work during the academic year in practice and providing better linkages to the following year to provide stronger support

for design in the final year of the B.Arch course. The present Board (2008) welcomes the School's efforts to date. The Board advises the School to continue to discuss the design of the module with students to satisfy the educational needs of the students. Discussion is ongoing regarding the place of the Design Project which is currently undertaken in the fifth year.

The design component of the academic year in practice has been restructured in a particular way in order to support the students in practice. This is based on acquisition of competences rather than developing imagination and appears to compensate for the varying breadths of experience acquired by students in practice. The School believed that this has been reasonably successful and that the design standard in the M.Arch has improved, with students feeling they have received a solid grounding.

- *Technology & Environment*

On the basis of the sample of portfolios provided, the Visiting Board confirms that all graduates of the MArch programme met all Part Two criteria in the area of Technology and Environment.

In year four students undertake a technology and practice module, the outcome of which is a critical study of a live project they are undertaking in practice. The Board considered that technology and environment is very well integrated into design work.

One of the University's missions is engagement with the community. The School has a tradition of running generally live projects at different parts of the course, especially the second year. At Part Two, graduates are

expected to develop their own briefs, which the School believes is very difficult to do and was chiefly undertaken by engaging user groups. The School noted that project briefs now engage with clients and less often with users, as was formerly the case.

- *Cultural Context*

On the basis of the sample of portfolios provided, the Visiting Board confirms that all graduates of the MArch programme met all Part Two criteria in the area of Design Cultural Context.

The Board was particularly impressed by the students' dissertations. The academic quality of the intake leads to the production of good work. The School also attracts dissertation assessors and examiners of high calibre.

- *Communication*

On the basis of the sample of portfolios provided, the Visiting Board confirms that all graduates of the MArch programme met all Part Two criteria in the area of Communication.

Communication skills, using a range of media, are very good. Traditional skills are developed throughout the course and students excel in mixed media. The range of media used is appropriate to the project.

- *Management Practice & Law*

On the basis of the sample of portfolios provided, the Visiting Board confirms that all graduates of the MArch programme met all Part Two criteria in the area of Management, Practice and Law.

The Board found that these criteria are covered thoroughly. The fact that students are simultaneously in practice and undertaking assignments is of benefit, giving students the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of this area.. The Board was particularly interested in the feasibility study of a PFI bid undertaken by the students. In this project students work as a team undertaking a competitive bid. This is adjudicated by staff and specialist visitors.

13.6.4 Progression within the course

The level of progression was satisfactory. Students must pass the fourth year in order to be permitted to enter the fifth. If they are deficient in credits at the July assessment they are permitted to resubmit in August. The Board noted that among the cohort under review, approximately 12% took leave of absence or withdrew.

13.6.5 Assessment:

A range of assessment methods is in use depending on the nature of the work, such as coursework, group practice and reports. Compensation is not permitted. Tasks are set during the year in practice but do not contribute to the final marks at the end of the M.Arch. As the School is aware that it has limited control over quality of the offices at which students are base, assessment of the year in practice is not based on the quality of experience but how the student has been able to reflect on their experience. This is intended to ensure that variety of experience gained in practice has no material effect on a student's marks.

13.6.6 Admissions and arrangements for direct entry at a stage other than the start of the course

Given the unique nature of the Cardiff programme care is taken in the admissions process to try to ensure that places are awarded to those best able to cope. During the third year of the Cardiff Part One, students receive a series of briefings about the content and structure of the Part Two. Graduates of the Cardiff Part One are granted automatic progression if they have attained First Class, 2.1 or 2.2 degree. Internal review at the end of the third year plays a role and is attended by a senior staff member from M.Arch admissions.

Those with 3<sup>rd</sup> class BSc (Hons) Architectural Studies from Cardiff may exceptionally be granted a place on the M.Arch following interview. Applicants from other schools must have a recognised Part One at 2.1 level at least. Places are awarded on the basis of an interview with design portfolio.

The 2004 Board advised that increasing the number of entrants from other schools might help further the School's ambitions to be a school of international standing. A proportion of students in the present Part Two cohorts are Part One graduates of other institutions, widening the diversity of the student body. The present Board noted that students with Part One from other institutions did not feel disadvantaged by not having taken Part One at Cardiff; they found the Part Two intensive but ultimately enjoyed the challenge. The intake varies between 50-65, of whom 10-15% are overseas students.

13.7 **Detailed Commentary on the Course leading to Part Three Qualification**

Overall the Board considered the Part Three to be a fine course whose candidates achieved very high standards.

The 2004 Visiting Board recommended that the School should either restructure its Part Three Exam Papers or formalise the process via which it ensures that the Professional Interview addresses topics not covered in exams to be able to more clearly demonstrate that all successful candidates meet all Part Three Validation Criteria. At the time of the 2004 visit these changes were already underway and were subsequently completed. Since the last visit the Part Three course has been brought within the university system. The examination now comprises four unseen two hour papers that cover each of the criteria. The Board considered that the new format of the examination was stringent and challenging.

Criteria for admission remain largely the same as at the time of the 2004 Visiting Board. All graduates of the School's M.Arch are normally accepted onto the Part Three. It is a condition of acceptance onto the Part Three that candidates are in approved employment and, because there is normally no Stage One Professional Practice for Cardiff graduates between Part One and Part Two, that they complete two years of practical training after their M.Arch. Candidates from other schools are considered if they hold a validated Part Two qualification, particularly if they are employed by a local practice.

About 15 candidates are enrolled each year. As some students may defer presenting for examination, there are normally 30 enrolled at any one time. Numbers are relatively small for various reasons, the chief ones being the challenging nature of the Cardiff Part Three and the wish of students to pursue their career in different parts of the UK, London in particular.

The course is run by a Scheme Convener who is also the Professional Studies adviser, maintaining contact with candidates and managing Part Three interviews.

Since the 2004 Visiting Board the School has introduced the Diploma/MA in Architecture. Students may do the Diploma (Stage 1) either in full-time mode (one year) or part-time mode (two years). On successful completion of stage 1, candidates are awarded the Diploma in Professional Studies which carries Part Three exemption. Additionally, and if they wish, students may progress to Stage 2, which comprises a 60-credit dissertation. On successful completion of this, candidates are awarded an MA in Professional Studies. The School commented that although relatively few Part Three candidates have elected to do so, the results have been very interesting.

The Postgraduate Diploma comprises six compulsory 20-credit modules. It is delivered chiefly through distance learning and three residential taught elements provide extensive coverage of the curriculum. Mid-way through the year the PSAs visit candidates to discuss progress. The PSA is able to take action if either party believes that the candidate is not gaining sufficient experience. It is possible to shadow another project if necessary.

The Board considered the Cardiff Part Three to be a very rigorous course both in coverage of and extension beyond the requirements of the core criteria. In addition to the core modules Part Three students also undertake International Construction Procurement module, which is assessed by a single 8000 word essay. The standard of presentation was generally high.

In a few cases the Board observed some discrepancy between marks awarded for written work and those awarded at the oral examination. As these involved candidates who had been awarded high marks throughout, the Board had every confidence in the integrity of the examination process and that threshold standards were appropriate. However, the Board did note that the External Examiner had not been able to observe the oral examinations and believe that, had she been able to do so, any discrepancies may have been picked up. The presence of the External Examiner at the oral examinations is not currently a requirement under the external examining arrangements although the examiner is invited to attend. However, the External Examiner was involved in considering written submissions and overall was content with the marks awarded for all aspects of the examination and with the examination processes in general. The Board noted and supports the External Examiner's wish, in future, to be present and therefore recommends to the School that the Part Three External Examiner observes at least a sample of the Professional/Oral Examinations in order to continue to ensure parity.

The Board welcomes the School's undertaking to bring more Professional Examiners into Part Three with current and wide knowledge and experience. The Board was pleased to note that the majority of professional examiners attended the APSA Training Day.

### 13.8 **External examining arrangements**

The School has appointed highly experienced External Examiners to each of the validated programmes. The number of Part Three professional examiners has increased since the last Visiting Board.

The External Examiners were consistent in their compliments to the School. They are confident stating that all students have met all the criteria. Examination procedures are well organised and examiners' comments are taken seriously and addressed. Processes are open and transparent. The unusual nature of the Cardiff programme is seen as a strength in itself. The Examiners expressed support for the structure of the Part Two and the way in which the School operates and manages it. Few concerns were expressed but the Examiners did offer some observations which they considered would help to improve the programme yet further.

Part One examiners focus mainly on the year of award. First and second year work is looked at but samples are not examined. In the third year all academic portfolios are available to the examiners, who sample where they believe appropriate.

In the area of cultural context at Part One, the Examiners commented that some sites that were chosen had been somewhat difficult and perhaps not appropriate. The School may wish to review the choice of sites.

M.Arch 1 work (fourth year) is available for the Externals' inspection but not formally considered. Primer project work (the transitional work from the fourth to the fifth year) is also sent to them but again, not formally considered. Although the Board understood that the fourth year work does not contribute to the final mark it was nonetheless interested that there was no obligation on the part of the External Examiners to review it.

Having earlier expressed some worries about the use of CAD, the External Examiners now believe that a good

balance has been achieved between CAD and hand-drawing.

Although improvements have been made to the fourth year, the Externals believed that work might be directed more usefully. They agreed that the course could be stressful but that students embarked on it voluntarily and their achievements were considerable. They commented on the high standard of work in the fifth year and its particular character, being well thought-out, carefully analysed and controlled. This is particularly impressive given that students only have one year in which to achieve this. While the fourth year was more prescriptive, the fifth year has been consistent in freedom, particularly with regard to the design project. They reported that there were some issues about the nature and ambition of some projects, for example a preponderance of landscape. Sometimes outputs could be less complex than might be expected but overall results were sophisticated. There is some discussion about the timing of the project, with the suggestion that it could perhaps be moved to the fourth year in response to professional bodies' advice. However, the current level of design work in the fourth year was of benefit even if results could be variable in quality. The dissertations in the year in practice are well documented, well referenced, sound pieces of work. They respond well to the students' enthusiasm.

Now that the number of studios has increased, the Externals would welcome diversity of approach, for example to embrace a more urban and more Welsh approach.

The Examiners reported that students were very aware of issues of sustainability even though it was not always as

visible as it could be. The Examiners hoped that in a few years' time the more connections will have made a connection with sustainable design research field, which could be very promising and successful. More evidence of strength in sustainable design in the fifth year would be welcomed. If there were any faults it might be that the School often tries to do too much with one project.

### 13.9 **Arrangements for Monitoring Professional Experience**

The Board considered that the arrangements for students post-Part One were exceptional. As recommended by the 2004 Visiting Board the School no longer uses the PEDR system for recording experience, but has implemented its own system linked to learning outcomes. This was well established by the time of the mid-term visit in 2006. This development was welcomed by the Board, which suggested that the new system could be developed yet further. The Board believes that the School could monitor the year in practice and encourage continuing dialogue with the students to develop a model that suits students' needs in preparation for the fifth year. The Board wondered if this was an area in which the Practice Links group could appropriately play a role, for example providing a productive forum for discussion.

### 13.10 **Students**

The Board enjoyed meeting representatives of all years in a lively and informative meeting. The students were highly articulate and expressed great support for School, the programmes and the staff. Students were attracted to the University by the city, the nature of the programme, the evident enthusiasm of the staff on open days and the strength in model-making. Among the many strengths of the School, particular mention was made of the following:

- The accessibility and availability of staff, who operate an open door policy. Students feel free to approach any tutor for advice. New staff have been well received.
- The good, balanced education and preparation for practice.
- Improvements to the physical facilities were welcomed and appreciated, particularly the mezzanines which increased studio space. Students believed that there was a perception that there is not enough room but in practice anyone who wishes to work in school can do so. More storage space might free up desk space for use by other students.
- The improved and integrated workshop which has resulted in greater use by the students. Students are highly appreciative of the support they received from the technician. They also welcomed the subsidisation by the School of printing costs.
- The small cohort size appealed to students, giving the opportunity for close relationships with tutors and visiting professors and the opportunity for one to one discussion.
- The support for the year in practice, not only during the preparatory period but also during the year itself. The efforts made by the School to visit each student in practice were commended and also reportedly welcomed by the practices.
- The research department and its influence on teaching. In addition, this enables students to consult researchers if they have a query. Students displayed great enthusiasm for having more contact with the research centres in the School and were excited about the new model for the third term of the first and second year.
- Students found the benefits from the year in practice valuable although it did not contribute to their overall final marks. The assignments in the year in practice were time consuming but did spark conversations in the office. Students' experience in practice seemed mostly positive and beneficial. The requirement to undertake design work in the fourth year helped them to keep their design skills honed. Some questioned the usefulness of the exercises they were required to do but others believed they were of value. Balancing academic work and practice work at the same time was stressful but manageable. The School took account of any big office projects in which students were involved.
- The intensive nature of the fifth year was manageable and many found it challenging and enjoyable.
- Primer projects are useful
- Students appreciate the freedom to choose their own sites.

Students believed that consideration of the following issues would improve their overall experience:

- Students thought that it might be helpful to integrate lecture modules more with each other and into design work. They believed the university structure had compelled the staff to separate technology and put it into a separate module. However, from the evidence submitted the Board was content with the integration of design and technology.

- The Board noted an apparent contradiction between the concerns expressed in the critical self-appraisal about CAD and workload problems and the discussion that arose in the meeting. The chief issue with CAD appears to be whether it is used as a design or a craft tool and wishing to be taught CAD as a design tool. However, many of the students recognised this is acquired through osmosis. Students felt that it was better to be grounded in the more difficult skills and they found that they could pick up additional CAD skills relatively quickly and easily in practice. They appreciated the fact that there was no single philosophy with which they were expected to comply. Students also learned from other students higher up in the school.
- The requirement for Cardiff Part Two graduates to gain at least two years' experience post-Part Two reportedly caused some confusion. Some believed that the structure of the Part Two programme and its implications for professional practice could be made clearer. Students agreed, however, that in practice the majority of graduates from any programme would probably acquire more than one year's experience before entering the Part Three examination.
- Students would welcome more engagement with live projects. Students have contact with practitioners who have worked on similar projects when working on the thesis; however this is not a formal part of the course.
- Students would like more involvement from visiting professors. In the M.Arch thesis students can have one to one tutorials with the visiting professors.

The Board noted that the students run a highly successful and proactive student society, the Student Association of the Welsh School of Architecture (SAWSA) which is completely self-financing and self-administering. A small amount of contingency money is provided by the School. Practitioners also attend lectures organised by SAWSA which are advertised through the RSAW.

#### 13.11 **Staff**

The Board enjoyed an open and wide ranging discussion with a large group of staff.

The School benefits from highly qualified staff sharing a common ethos. Appointments are not made merely on the basis of a research profile; staff are actively engaged in research, teaching and learning and practice. Appointments consider studio needs, design needs, research needs, and the needs of Wales. There is a strong sense of community in the staff body and the significant number of new staff recently appointed have integrated well. There is now great diversity in the staff body in terms both of demographics and professional experience and interests. All staff research and teach simultaneously and all were returned submissions to the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise. As the School has been research-led for a long time the staff appear accustomed to balancing research, teaching and administrative commitments. The management is aware of the potential for tension between commitment and workload does not appear to be a contentious issue.

Practice links are actively sought and exploited. A Practice links group was set up three years ago for a specific occasion with a semi-formal remit and this has continued

in an informal loose way. The Group wishes to broaden its activities.

The University and School are committed to staff development, providing funds to allow staff to attend conferences. All staff must undertake the PG Certificate in University Teaching and Learning and may defer in order to finish PhDs if appropriate. Shared teaching through crits and tutorials helps new staff to gain experience.

The current SSR is healthy, ranging from 1:12 in Year 1 of the Part One to 1:9 in Year 2 of the M.Arch. The School is keen to preserve this and to experiment with different methods of teaching to deploy staff expertise to best advantage.

**13.12 Research;**

The School has an impressive track record in research, being awarded a 5\* in the last Research Assessment Exercise. It is expected by the University that teaching is research-led and the University expected the School to perform equally well in the 2008 RAE. The School also publishes several research journals. All staff were involved in the research assessment exercise to varying degrees. This is managed through the research groups and the research committee, helped by a dedicated research administrator.

The Board found that overall there is a consistent attempt to relate research to teaching and much of the teaching is informed by research. There is an active conduit between researchers and students. The School teaches from its research strengths and most staff teach from their subject area. This varies according to the expertise of those currently on the staff. The influence of research activities

on the validated programmes is most apparent in the M.Arch thematic studios and is set to be extended further in the undergraduate programme with the introduction of the first and second year shared projects. At M.Arch, students align themselves for their dissertations with the tutor who is an expert in the relevant area.

The Design research unit has been considerably strengthened. The new proposal of the third term studio is an attempt to increase the level of integration and make links with research more explicit.

The issues identified with IT have led to the creation of and appointment to a research position at international level. The Board understood that CAD would be research-led. The School also benefits from CEBE in the School whose staff take an active role in the School, particularly at M.Arch 1.

Although research labs are chiefly used by masters students, M.Arch students may also use them and undergraduates receive an introduction.

**13.13 Equal Opportunities:**

The Board commended the initiative whereby the School builds links with local schools in order to widen access. The School and University pride themselves on attracting high quality applicants while proactively pursuing a widening-participation agenda and took these issues very seriously. The University's approach is to try to encourage students to obtain the right qualifications rather than to lower entry standards. While the mix of ethnic backgrounds might be broader, the gender balance across the three programmes is excellent, with 50/50 recorded at

undergraduate level. The staff gender balance is also excellent.

13.14 **Resourcing and facilities;**

At the time of the visit the University was undergoing a comprehensive review of estates, having acquired a large brownfield site in Cardiff adjacent to the University. It was anticipated that University estates will be in a state of flux over the next few years as all options are considered.

The School receives the support of the University in its wish to increase and improve its space. However, space is still under pressure and several options for future development are being considered by the University. The Board understood that problems associated with the progress of building schemes were usually due to technical difficulties and funding is not an issue. Extension of the existing School of Architecture building is probably not feasible due to structural issues.

The 2004 Board offered advice about studio space and the potential for conflict with the needs of researchers. The 2008 Board understood that expansion of the masters' programmes will not be at the expense of undergraduate teaching space. The masters' programmes require little in the way of physical space and the School believes they can be accommodated without compromising the undergraduate programmes. It is anticipated that numbers on the masters' programmes will not rise to the extent that space becomes a problem.

- *Studios*

The School has already invested heavily in improving the size and quality of studio space since the last full Visiting Board, which has been achieved chiefly by building

mezzanine floors in the existing space, on which the University has spent £0.5 million. While this represents a considerable improvement, space is still under pressure.

The Board found the studios bright and airy. Demand to work in the studio has increased since the last Visiting Board and the studio culture is lively and vibrant.

All first year students have their own space. Officially there is 50% provision for the upper years but students reported that this finds its own level and those who wish to work in the School can do so. Studios are open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In addition to the obvious benefits of such flexibility, students also noted that the computer network appears to work more quickly out of hours. The students appreciated the additional space that had been created and suggested that more efficient use of this could be achieved if there were more storage space. The corridors are used as crit space, which was enjoyed by the students and makes work of all years instantly accessible to all students.

- *Workshops*

The School has recently appointed a well-qualified technician to manage the newly commissioned workshop adjacent to the studios. The technician is actively involved in the school, attending meetings and briefings which enable him to plan in advance. His contribution to the School has already made a considerable impact and is appreciated by staff and students alike. The workshop is open from 9 to 5 on Monday to Friday (extended during busy times) and can be opened at other times by appointment. Much equipment can be used by the students themselves (following appropriate induction training) but other equipment can only be used by

qualified individuals. Students have 24-hour access to a spray-booth and model testing facility with a mirror sky and heliodon.

The workshops are being used well which is reflected in the quality of the work on display.

In addition to the Environmental Design laboratories The School's facilities include a wind tunnel, a hemispherical sky and heliodon. The Board believes that greater use could be made by students of this unique facility.

- *IT*

The School is currently in a transitional period with regard to the teaching of CAD and the provision of IT services. The School mentioned the former lack of research strength in this area as a potential weakness. The School now has a long-term IT strategy and has recently made a full-time appointment (effective from the beginning of the 2008/2009 academic session) in this area whose remit will be to develop this further. This individual also has a strong research profile in CAD, and, in time, wishes to appoint an additional staff member who will interface directly with the students.

As noted elsewhere, the Board formed the opinion that CAD teaching was not as significant issue as it had appeared and had been thoroughly addressed.

Since the last visit the School has decided not to develop IT studios but return to computer labs. Printing facilities have been improved, in particular the provision of plotters. Printing costs are subsidised.

The School also has an in-house media lab, containing high-specification networked IBM compatible computers. This can be accessed via a code on a drop-in basis. Students are encouraged to use their own laptop and wireless networking has been introduced to facilitate this. In response to the 2004 Board's advice, laptops are available for loan. Laptops are also available on a loan-basis. Digital cameras, a video camera, and a digital projector may also be borrowed. There are open-access computing facilities in the Library and elsewhere in the University. Vectorworks, AutoCAD, Microstation, Sketchup, Photoshop, Adobe illustrator, Adobe In-Design and Ecotect are all available on the University-wide computer network and can therefore be accessed from all locations.

- *Library*

The School is extremely fortunate in having an in-house Architecture Library, adjacent to the Bute Library which serves other subjects such as City and Regional Planning and Social Sciences. This is a tremendous resource, committed to supporting teaching and research and is much valued by staff and students alike. There are close links between School and Library, fostered by a dedicated subject librarian who liaises closely with the School. Architecture staff and students have access to 17 libraries in total, but the value of having an excellent resource on-site cannot be overestimated.

Students are given good induction and training in library use and research methods appropriate to their level of study throughout the course. The Board was impressed with the support system for students with special needs, in terms both of assessment of needs and equipment provided to help them make best use of the facilities.

The librarians consider that the library is well-funded with its own budget in addition to the central budget, a separate budget for teaching material and a multiple copies fund. The acquisitions policy is flexible, facilitated by the Collection Management and Development Agreement. The subject librarian and chief librarian attend school meetings and scheme review meetings at which projects are presented, so that they are informed in advance about necessary acquisitions. Tutors also submit reading lists which ensures that relevant material is in stock. A considerable amount of the budget is devoted to journals. The current architecture collection comprises 25,948 books, 95 journals, of which 36 are electronic, electronic resources, CD-Roms, DVDs and videos. The School also subscribes to electronic databases. Some subscriptions are funded centrally. There are various types of loan status dependant upon the material concerned. Some books are for library use only and current journals may not be borrowed. The Library analyses use so that they can alter a publication's loan status accordingly and order multiple copies if necessary. Material is shelved in storage (in the same building) if it has not been borrowed for five years, which ensures that the collection remains relevant. There is a large monograph section and a rare book collection, which includes bound editions of the Architectural Review from 1899 to 1950. The Board also noted the Salisbury collection in the Arts Library, which is a unique resource for rare Welsh books, maps and prints. A Professional Studies Reference section caters for Part Three candidates.

There is provision for interlibrary loans, which is used chiefly by researchers but may also be used by students in practice. Students on the academic year in practice also

make use of library when returning for the short courses. Librarians are willing to scan and send items to students in practice based overseas and to write letters of introduction to enable them to use overseas libraries.

The Library also provides access to the Architectural Publications Index (APIID), the Avery Index to Architectural Periodicals and the RIBA British Architectural Library Catalogue. Several catalogues can also be accessed off campus. The building houses the RIBA office library and trade library, which can also be used as a teaching space. There is a group study room which is in increasing demand. The Library provides PC, printing, scanning and photocopying facilities and wireless zones. The Bute Library is open from 08.45-21.30 Monday to Friday and 10.00 to 17.30 on Saturday. Opening times are reduced in the summer and the library may open late on Thursdays in the next academic session.

The buildings appear to be DDA compliant.

#### 14. **Attachments**

Prior to the visit the School provided:  
 Critical Self-Appraisal  
 Responses to RIBA Questionnaire and Supplementary information as required by the Procedures.

In the Base Room the School provided:  
 Details of Assessment, Examination Papers and Dissertations Titles 2008 (Parts One, Two and Three)  
 Academic Staff CVs  
 Project Briefs 2006/2007  
 Syllabi, Reading lists and Timetables 2006/2007  
 BSc Student Handbooks 2007/2008 Years 1, 2 and 3  
 M.Arch Student Handbooks 2007/2008 Years 1 and 2

Undergraduate Prospectus 2008  
Postgraduate Prospectus 2008  
Proceedings of Research Student Conference 2003  
2<sup>nd</sup> Research Student Conference 2005  
Publicity material  
Research publications