

**Royal Institute of British Architects**

**Confirmed Report of the RIBA  
Visiting Board to Robert Gordon  
University**

Confirmed by RIBA Education Committee on 25 November 2009

**Scott Sutherland School of Architecture and  
Built Environment  
Faculty of Design and Technology**

BSc (Hons) Architecture – Part 1 after 3 years

Master of Architecture (MArch) – Parts 1 and 2

Pg Dip Advanced Architectural Studies - Part 2

Date of Visiting Board: 11/12 June 2009

## 1. Information About the Courses

### 1.1 Courses offered for revalidation:

BSc (Hons) Architecture – Part 1 after 3 years, Honours award after 4 years (i.e. year 1 of 2 year Part 2).  
Master of Architecture (MArch) – Parts 1 and 2, 5 years full time.

Pg Dip Advanced Architectural Studies - Part 2

BSc (Hons) Architecture (European Practice) Part 1\*  
BSc (Hons) Interior Architecture, Part 1\*

\*Although the School has discontinued these programmes, there remain several students enrolled who are due to graduate in 2010. These were therefore considered for validation by the present Board.

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

The Scott Sutherland School  
Robert Gordon University  
Garthdee Road  
Aberdeen  
AB10 7QB

T: + 44 (0)1224 263700  
F: + 44 (0)1224 263777  
W: <http://www.rgu.ac.uk/ss/>

### 1.2 Name of Awarding Body Robert Gordon University

### 1.3 Name of Head of School David McClean

## 2. Membership of the Visiting Board

### 2.1 The members of the RIBA Visiting Board for the visit on 11/12 June 2009 were:

Judi Farren Bradley (Chair)  
Cameron Wilson (Vice-Chair)  
Andy Bourne  
Nick Hayhurst  
Oliver Chapman (Regional Nominee)  
Doug King (Non-Architect Member)  
Elizabeth Barney (Graduate/Student Member)

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

David Gloster (RIBA Director of Education) and Oliver Richards (RIBA Council member) were in attendance as observers.

## 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. For more information see [www.architecture.com](http://www.architecture.com).

**4. Recommendations of the Visiting Board to the Royal Institute of British Architects Education Committee 25 November 2009**

The Visiting Board recommends to the RIBA Education Committee **Continued Validation** of:

BSc (Hons) Architecture – Part 1 after 3 years, Honours award after 4 years (i.e. year 1 of 2 year Part 2).  
Master of Architecture (MArch) – Parts 1 and 2  
Pg Dip Advanced Architectural Studies - Part 2

BSc (Hons) Architecture (European Practice) Part 1\*  
BSc (Hons) Interior Architecture, Part 1\*

\*Although the School has discontinued these programmes, there remain several students enrolled who are due to graduate in 2010. These were therefore considered for validation by the present Board.

4.2 The next Visiting Board will take place in 2013.

**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 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 Board was mindful of the fact that the visit took place at a time of transition for the School. Following a sustained period of significant change, the Board considered that the School had re-established its identity and found its home within the university and architectural education. This was followed by the complex transition from the 4+1 mode of programme delivery to 3+2. The School appeared to be well run and the Board was pleased to note the very positive support from the vice chancellor and the university. The core staff team has been strengthened by many appointments and the addition of three visiting professors. The Board commends the palpable sense of optimism and enthusiasm among the staff and students. The Board offers the School every encouragement and hopes that its recommendations and advice will assist the School in realising its aspirations and fulfilling its potential.
- 10.2 The School's strengths include:
- The commitment from senior management
  - Its facilities, both within the School itself and those of other University departments
  - The potential offered by the new structure of the programmes, particularly at Part Two, of which the Board hopes the School will take full advantage

- The School's commendable aspirations to build on the potential for interdisciplinary working, which the Board commends
- The School's location which could be further developed as a specialist area providing a unique selling point for the school
- The strong core team
- The enthusiasm of the student body. The Board was particularly impressed with the success of the student society, 57'10. The Board also commends the success of the Big Crit and the practice of encouraging final year Part Two students to become involved in Part One.

### 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 course team identify appropriately demanding award level design briefs which consistently demonstrate that learning outcomes are met at Part One.
- 10.3.2 The Board recommends that the learning outcomes of design briefs are consistently mapped, especially at award level, to demonstrate the potential to integrate students' understanding of technological and environmental issues at Part One. This should include learning outcomes consistently mapped and made clear to students.

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- 10.3.3 The Board recommends that the course team encourage students to systematically document the appraisal of architectural precedents, design methodologies, and the evolution of alternative design solutions when undertaking design studio projects at Part One.
- 10.3.4 The Board recommends that the course team ensure that the theoretical, formal, and technological resolution of Stage 6 design studio projects is appropriate in aspiration to the award level at Part Two.
- 10.3.5 The Board recommends that the course team critically reappraise the effectiveness of the visiting professor system to Stage 6 design studio outputs at Part Two.
- 10.3.6 The Board recommends that the course team develop the dissertation as a freestanding, extended, structured, and reflective vehicle for research into and critical examination of architectural theoretical thinking at Part Two.
- 10.3.7 The Board recommends that the course team encourage students to systematically document the appraisal of architectural precedents, design methodologies, and the evolution of alternative design solutions when undertaking design studio projects at Part Two.
- 10.3.8 The Board recommends that, at Part Two, there is systematic documentation of process which is retained in the academic portfolios.
- 10.3.9 The Board is convinced that much of the future promise of the School is dependent on the strength of a culture derived from its base in the Scott Sutherland Building. However, should the School have to move, the Board recommends that any new building provide high-quality dedicated pin-up space to allow students to review and celebrate their work in order to maintain this crucial peer learning opportunity. As the Board encourages the School to maintain and increase opportunities for students at all levels to work together in vertical projects, any new building should enhance this.
- The Board requests that the School provide a report to the NCCCG during the first quarter of 2010. This report and the recommendations of the present Visiting Board will be used as the basis for the mid-term visit, which should take place in 2011.
- 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;
- 10.4.2 The Board advises the School to reconsider reinstating the system where all graduating students are given the opportunity to present their work to External Examiners. This was identified as a particular issue for Year 6.
- 10.4.3 The Board advises that the School review its communications methods with students in response to student comments. Issues identified included a need for clarity and understanding of assessment procedures, transparency of grading system criteria and future amendments to the structure and content of the programme.
- 10.4.4 The Board advises the School to maintain the provision of its own workshop and the links with the Art School.

10.4.5 The Board advises that the course team consistently apply a single set of learning outcomes in course documentation when providing feedback for students and making formal assessment decisions.

## 11. Summary of Previous Visiting Board Reports

11.1 The last RIBA Visiting Board to the Robert Gordon University took place on 27/28 October 2005.

11.2 The Visiting Board recommended **Continued Validation** of:

BSc (Hons) Architecture Part One, 4 years full time  
 BSc (Hons) Architecture (European Practice) Part One, 4 years full time  
 BSc (Hons) Interior Architecture Part One, 4 years full time

11.3 The Visiting Board recommended **Continued Validation with Conditions** of:

MArch Architecture Part Two, 1 year full time  
 PG Dip/MSc Architecture Part Two, 1 year full time

11.4 A revisit to the School took place on 9 June 2006. The Revisiting Board recommended **Continued Validation** of the

MArch Architecture Part Two, 1 year full time  
 PG Dip/MSc Architecture Part Two, 1 year full time

This recommendation was confirmed by the RIBA Education Committee and the condition discharged.

## 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 was concise, informative and candid. Major changes have taken place at the school in the last few years at both administrative and academic level. As mentioned earlier, the School has experienced several changes of faculty since the last visiting board, not all of them with positive consequences. However, the present arrangements have been well received.

It is important to note that the present visit took place during the transitional year between the former and incoming programme and award structures. Formerly, the validated architecture programmes at the Scott Sutherland School operated on a 4+1 structure; i.e. a first degree of four years' duration (operating according to the Scottish Honours system), on attainment of which Part One was also conferred. Part Two is conferred upon successful completion of a fifth year. In 2007 the School decided to move to a 3+ 2 structure for the following reasons, as given in the University documentation:

- To operate a structure that is clear and unambiguous to students, External Examiners, and Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies.

- To clarify the academic distinction between Parts 1 and 2
- To promote opportunity for student mobility and transfer between Parts 1 and 2
- Facilitation of greater integration of research expertise and activity and the curriculum
- With reference to Interior Architecture, to provide the potential for future specialisation at Part 2 (although not a proposed specialisation in the short term)
- Refresh curriculum in line with current developments of importance to the profession

These changes were duly approved by the RIBA New Courses and Course Changes Group. Exceptional arrangements have been made for students graduating during the transition period to receive an academic award as well as Part One. Staff have also undertaken an extensive benchmarking exercise in order to calibrate the programmes appropriately.

The BSc (Hons) Interior Architecture programme has been discontinued. The School reported that it had become increasingly difficult to meet the criteria following their implementation in 2003 without compromising its distinctiveness. This had affected numbers and was compounded by resourcing issues. The School had earlier taken the decision to discontinue the BSc (Hons) Architecture (European Practice) which is being phased out.

The Board was encouraged by the developments that had taken place since the last visit. The Board commented that, at present, the School itself seems unsure of what form and content the new Part Two will exhibit. The

Board recommends, therefore, that the detail of the programme, as it develops, should be forwarded to the RIBA New Course and Course Changes Group for consideration and comment. Ultimately, however, it has confidence that the School's plans for the remodelled Part Two programme will give students further opportunity to creatively meet the present and revised Part Two validation criteria, once implemented.

The School is looking to rediscover and redefine its architectural ambition, taking advantage of its strengths in technology, the diversity in background and interests of its staff, links with practice and local authorities and its physical location in both city and landscape and its developing Nordic connections.

There is clear support for and commitment to architecture at institutional level. The University intends to consolidate all its activities at the Garthdee site in the fullness of time, in order to effect greater synergies between disciplines. The Board learnt from University senior management that architecture was due to leave its present building in 2013. The University plans to provide good interim accommodation for architecture and built environment. Staff and students are aware of the University's masterplan for the campus, but the Board noted some confusion among staff and students about interim or future arrangements for architecture in the event of relocation.

While the Board commends the University's continuing support for architecture, it notes that the unique identity of the School is linked to a great extent to the present building which it received in a bequest. However, the Board recognises the opportunities that moving into a

bespoke building should provide. The Board recommends that any new building provide dedicated pin-up space to allow students to review and celebrate their work in order to maintain this crucial peer learning opportunity. The Board encourages the School to maintain and increase opportunities for students at all levels to work together in vertical projects. Any new building should enhance this.

There have also been significant changes to the external examining process, moving from a process of interviewing to one of sampling.

The Board commends the existence of a Professional Advisory Panel and understands that the future working of this body is currently being reviewed.

13.2 **Documentation and Arrangements for the Visit**

All documentation was forwarded in a timely manner. The documentation was clear and concise. The Board received additional materials and clarification as needed. All other arrangements were excellent and the Board thanks the School for its assistance and co-operation.

13.2.1 *Record of Academic Portfolios sampled during the visit*

The Visiting Board considered the work of the 2008/2009 graduating cohorts.

**Part One: year 1** 3 lowest, 2 middle and 2 high from a cohort of 82; year 2, 3 lowest, 2 middle and 2 high from a cohort of 63; year 3, 3 lowest, 2 middle and 2 high from a cohort of 55, [check nos with school].

**Part Two; Year one (stage 5)** 3 lowest, 2 middle and 2 high from a cohort of 90; **Year Two (Stage 6):** The lowest pass from each individual studio (3 studios in total);

2 middle passes and 2 high passes (any studio) from a cohort of 60.

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

Due to the restructuring of the course the School remains in the process of addressing the issues raised in the 2005 and 2006 Visiting Board reports. The Board had general confidence that matters will continue to be addressed. The Board acknowledges the written responses to external examiners' reports and looks forward to their full implementation, the results of which will be considered by the next full Visiting Board.

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

The School of Architecture and the Built Environment forms, with the Gray's School of Art, School of Computing and School of Engineering, the Faculty of Design and Technology. In addition to the validated architecture programmes, the School also offers undergraduate programmes in architectural technology, surveying, Construction and Design Management and postgraduate programmes in surveying, design management, advanced architectural studies, construction project management and property development. An MSc in Sustainable Futures and a Professional Doctorate are in development.

After several rapid changes of faculty in a short period, architecture staff are content with the present position. The masterplan will develop a larger complex which will bring disciplines together. Architecture staff have been involved in the master planning. The School intends to

explore interdisciplinarity whilst retaining discipline strength and identity. This is work in progress. The School aims to develop a culture and attitude of collaboration co-operation and produce graduates who are in accord with this.

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

13.5.1 Clarity, validity and achievement of course objectives  
This is understandably in a state of flux given recent and continuing changes. The Board has confidence that the School is in a position to establish and deliver clarity at Part One.

As the core of the course and delivery of the BSc (Hons) Interior Architecture and BSc (Hons) Architecture (European Practice) courses (both now discontinued) are identical to that of the BSc (Hons) Architecture, the Board had confidence that the remaining students on these programmes will satisfy the criteria on graduation and was therefore able to recommend Continued Validation for these programmes.

13.5.2 Course design and content  
Part One is a year-based programme on a modular framework. The structure of the Part One is very clear. Staff reported that the structural change has allowed them to look at the course both strategically and at a more detailed level.

Appropriate changes have been made to give students the opportunity to meet the criteria at Stage 3, rather than at Stage 5 as was formerly the case. The Board recognises that further adjustments will probably be made at Stages 1 and 2 to ensure that Stage 3 is appropriately underpinned

The Board encourages the course team to ensure clarity between the stated course outcomes and marking criteria. As noted earlier, the present year marks the transition between the former structure and the present one; therefore, some Stage 5 students (on Professional Experience last session) were assessed by the University for Part One in June 2009.

The Board considered that there was a clear structure to the award year, but the transparency of assessment processes could be improved. However, overall the Board was impressed with the way that the third year students had met the challenge of meeting Part One under the new structure. This achievement instilled confidence in the Board that standards had improved and would continue to do so. The Board notes the benchmarking exercises undertaken by the School to establish appropriate levels and thresholds.

The School is anticipating the implementation of the new validation criteria as an opportunity for yet more flexibility.

13.5.3 Quality and coverage of the syllabus (including balance and integration between design/non-design work)

- *Design*  
On the basis of the sample of portfolios provided, the Board confirmed that all graduates of the BSc (Hons) Architecture programme met all Part One criteria in the area of Design.

Students enjoyed the challenges represented within the design projects especially at year 3, which included opportunities to engage with existing buildings within an

historic environment and the rich variation. The learning curve presented by these was challenging.

However, while content that criteria were met, the Board recommends that the course team identify appropriately demanding award level design briefs which consistently demonstrate that learning outcomes are met at Part One.

The Board recommends that design briefs, especially at award level, should consistently demonstrate the potential to integrate students' understanding of technological and environmental issues at Part One.

The Board recommends that the course team encourage students to systematically document the appraisal of architectural precedents, design methodologies, and the evolution of alternative design solutions when undertaking design studio projects at Part One.

- *Technology & Environment*

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

The technology units run parallel to and are clearly integrated into the design projects at all stages. In addition to the in-house staff, a range of visiting expert staff is available to the students. At both Part One and Part Two more external experts are being brought in to support this area.

- *Cultural Context*

On the basis of the sample of portfolios provided, the Board confirmed that all graduates of the BSc (Hons)

Architecture programme met all Part One criteria in the area of Cultural Context.

Whilst students met the criteria, the board would advise the School to review the assessment mechanisms for cultural context and the balance of components. The Board noted good use of precedent studies and encourages the course team to explore stronger integration of cultural context into design projects.

- *Communication*

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

Students used a variety of communications methods. The Board recognises the importance of the School's workshop and access to the very fine workshops of the Grays School of Art. The Board is pleased that links with the Art School will be retained.

Students are encouraged to develop a reflective journal, which they found to be a useful exercise and which forms part of the evidence shown to external examiners. The Board advises the course team to encourage students to record and reflect upon the design process to ensure that sufficient emphasis is placed on students recording design development as part of a critical process.

The Board encourages the School to make full use of the workshops and material available for physical and modelled explorations of projects, and to require students to record this comprehensively in their academic portfolio.

- *Management Practice & Law*

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

Students' awareness of this at Part One was adequate and chiefly delivered through a dedicated module in Year 3. The School might wish to consider whether the formal examination is the most appropriate method of assessment.

- *Preparation for Professional Experience, (Part 1 only)*

Students felt well-prepared. There was a high employability rate amongst students until affected by the economic downturn.

13.5.4 Progression within the course

The Board noted the high attrition rates, particularly the failure rate in the final year. This was discussed with both staff and the external examiners. Staff had noted a tendency among some students to focus on the design project to the detriment of other areas. Under the current system, students cannot recover before June even when they are aware that there are areas in which they are deficient. Students expressed concern about appropriate feedback. The start of year induction is now repeated at the beginning of each semester to remind students of requirements. The requirement to meet Part One at the end of year 3 may have been a contributory factor. The Board would expect to see this improve as Part One develops as a 3-year programme.

13.5.5 Assessment:

Part One students expressed different opinions about their understanding of assessment and clarity of processes; the third years present were content that this was made apparent but earlier years were less sure.

The Board advises the School to review the relative weightings between formal examination, coursework and integrated elements with design projects.

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

The standard offer is BBBB SQA Higher or CCC at GCE A level with stipulations regarding subjects. Art is not compulsory but preferred. Other school leaving qualifications are, of course, considered. Applicants may, in some circumstances, be required to present a portfolio of work. Candidates are only interviewed if they do not meet the standard profile of entry qualifications as stipulated by the university. There are procedures for applicants from a non-traditional background and the University runs an Access Programme.

Annual intake has steadily grown over the last few years, exceeding the formal targets. However, there are no plans to increase student numbers further. The University is striving for excellence and to improve the student experience and believes expansion in student numbers may compromise this.

The Board supports the admission of non-traditional entrants in widening participation. The Board applauds this initiative and encourages the School to keep this under review.

The School has long-established links with several institutions in Malaysia whose students, after 3 years of study, may enter the RGU Part One after 18 months. The School continuously monitors and amends the supporting processes to ensure that these remain appropriate. The Malaysian links are valued as bringing vibrancy and different cultural dimension to the RGU Part One.

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

13.6.1 Clarity, validity and achievement of course objectives  
The Board noted that this course is in transition and the School's ambitions will be realised over time but considered the current objectives an adequate basis.

13.6.2 Course design and content  
The School is confident that the structure of Stage 5 is sound and that the core elements are fundamentally in place to support their vision of the new Part Two which will allow them to build a stronger, more confident Part 2, enabling them to strengthen the new themes. The Board encourages the course team to keep under review the significantly different structures for Levels 5 and 6.

Design studio is central to Part Two. Students are expected to work at a more strategic level and to develop high level research skills. Another significant change is the development of themed studios, each led by a Visiting Professor. This is intended to expand and develop the programme's definition and character and increase the breath and opportunity in the student experience. The School wishes to encourage different directions in each unit but is aware of the need to provide parity of opportunity and assessment across all units and the necessity to moderate. The Board noted these

developments considered that the introduction of visiting professors had been a good experiment. However, the Board advises that the School should critically reappraise the effectiveness of the visiting professor programme and whether it can meet the stated ambition and pedagogic intent of the programme.

The School believes that year 6 has great potential and become focussed and more profound with the visiting professors' contribution and the relationships with practice. The School hopes that this will prepare students for a beneficial Part 3 experience

A module on research methods has been introduced in order to support the dissertation. Henceforth the compulsory structure will be to undertake the research methods module in year 5, followed by research for the dissertation over the summer vacation. The first six weeks of the sixth year will be given over to the dissertation. This is supported by weekly dissertation tutorials in the studio. The second semester is more detailed and advanced. This is supported by an elective; at the time of the visit 5 electives were available and the Board understood that this number would increase.

While technically the dissertation can consider any subject, implicitly the staff would like dissertations to be aligned with the themed areas. In the future it may be worth developing groups of students who can align with groups of staff, ultimately with a view to working collaboratively with staff in areas of research interest. The staff hope that the research methods module will also benefit studio work, helping students to develop a thematic thesis.

The Board considered that Part Two had the feeling of a course in evolution. The Board commends the decision to include a masters level dissertation at Part Two and its relevance to the Part Two as a whole. The Board welcomed the new direction and potential indicated by the anticipated influence of research on the dissertation (when implemented) and thence to Part Two as a whole. The Board considered that Level 5 was clearly on a trajectory of improvement. However, there was still a great deal of progress to be made at level 6. The Board recommends that the course team develop the dissertation as a freestanding, extended, structured, and reflective vehicle for research into and critical examination of architectural culture at Part Two.

The Board considered that the School's aspirations were laudable and offers every encouragement. The Board remained concerned that the last crit is not the most intense crit, hence its observations in paragraph 13.6.5.

13.6.3 Quality and coverage of the syllabus (including balance and integration between design/non-design work)

- *Design*

On the basis of the sample of portfolios provided, the Board confirmed that all graduates of the M.Arch programme met all Part Two criteria in the area of Design.

Design at Part Two is adequate and student outcomes meet the criteria. The studio structure was successful in establishing a range of sites. The Board considered that the specificity of the design techniques in each of the studios could be more distinct. The Board would encourage the course team to further develop the

programme ethos, possibly in the context of defining a statement on critical regionalism.

The Board observed a lack of evidence of significant progression in students' work and the level of attainment between Stages 5 and 6. Although Stage 5 work is good, Stage 6 does not demonstrate further development.

The Board recommends that the course team ensure that the theoretical, formal, and technological resolution of Stage 6 design studio projects is appropriate in aspiration to the award level at Part Two.

The Board recommends that the course team critically reappraise the effectiveness of the visiting professor system to Stage 6 design studio outputs at Part Two.

The Board recommends that the course team encourage students to systematically document the appraisal of architectural precedents, design methodologies, and the evolution of alternative design solutions when undertaking design studio projects at Part Two.

- *Technology & Environment*

On the basis of the sample of portfolios provided, the Board confirmed that all graduates of the M.Arch programme met all Part Two criteria in the area of Technology and Environment

Staff are aware that this is a developing area of the programme. The Board noted that more external engineers are now involved at Stage 5 and individuals with technical expertise are involved in marking the design process. Students considered that they received sufficient external assistance at the appropriate time.

While the Board was content that criteria were met, the Board advises that the School critically reassess the integration of the criteria with the design module. The course team should ensure that technology is appropriate in aspiration to the award level.

- *Cultural Context*

On the basis of the sample of portfolios provided, the Board confirmed that all graduates of the M.Arch programme met all Part Two criteria in the area of Cultural Context.

The Board fully supports the course team in the introduction of research methods module in level 5 and the masters level dissertation and would encourage them to develop this in relation to the research strengths of the members of staff.

- *Communication*

On the basis of the sample of portfolios provided, the Board confirmed that all graduates of the M.Arch programme met all Part Two criteria in the area of Communication.

As at Part One, the Board advises the course team to encourage students to record and reflect upon the design process to ensure that sufficient emphasis is placed on students recording design development as part of a critical process. The Board recommends that, at Part Two, there is systematic documentation of process which is retained in the academic portfolios.

The Board would welcome further experimentation and development in the representation of award level design projects.

- *Management Practice & Law*

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

This is chiefly delivered through the Professional Practice and Management module.

13.6.4 Progression within the course

Progression rates at Part Two appeared appropriate.

13.6.5 Assessment:

There is a lack of clarity in students' minds about when they are being assessed. At master's level students reported that they were not always sure about their progress during the year and would welcome more formative feedback. Some expressed the opinion that there were some inconsistencies in the marking system.

In former years students presented work to the external examiners. Some students missed this but others did not, feeling it added pressure. However, all were agreed that the final presentation in its present form did not offer a sense of finale and a celebration of the culmination of many years' work that they felt it deserved. The School is aware that some students miss the opportunity to present their work to the externals; however, there is a series of internal reviews which does allow students to present. The School made a conscious decision in year 5 to have

external crits before the final presentation to give students the opportunity to act upon the feedback.

Although the newly-introduced 'Big Crit' had been a successful and enjoyable event, allowing students to see the whole body of work., there were some timing issues of programming and the lack of an opportunity for every graduating student to present their work was considered to be a loss by some students.

Students commented that it was difficult to visit other Part Two studios and attend each other's crits due to scheduling arrangements. However, Stage 6 students had had the opportunity to tutor and crit second year Part 1 students. This was mutually beneficial; the second years enjoyed this and the added layer of questioning it introduced and the links it established between different years. The Board welcomes and encourages this.

Although it would be to exceed the remit of the Visiting Board to suggest how assessment might be conducted, the Board could understand the students' disappointment that their final crit had a sense of anti-climax. The Board advises the School to reconsider reinstating the system where all graduating students are given the opportunity to present their work to External Examiners. This was identified as a particular issue for Year 6.

The Board advises that the course team consistently apply a single set of learning outcomes in course documentation when providing feedback to students and making formal assessment decisions.

The Board suggests that the course team review the level of rigour required within a 45 credit module and

demonstration of critical design process and design technique.

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

The Board commends the fact that the new structure will enable the admission of Part One graduates from other schools. This will enable greater mobility and diversity and will be of benefit to staff and students. There will be no advanced entry beyond the start of Stage 5, i.e. the beginning of the two year Part 2 course. The present session (2008/09) represented the final occasion that students could gain advanced entry to Stage 5 (being the final session that Part 1 was awarded on completion of this stage). Intake for Session 2009-10 is on the basis that all students seeking direct entry to the Part 2 programme must have Part 1 exemption from RIBA and ARB. Should this not be the case, candidates may be offered entry to the start of Stage 3.

The Board encourages the course team to continue to monitor the admission with advanced standing arrangements afforded to students from associated programmes outside the UK in order to ensure that they are appropriately prepared to join the programme and that they have an equivalence of student experience across the provision.

#### 13.7 External examining arrangements

The School benefits from high-quality, well-respected, experienced external examiners who expressed knowledge and support for the School and its development. The Board was provided with clear information about the external examining process and recent changes that have

been made. There was recognition from students and staff that the changes have had an impact on the arrangements for the award years. The decision to sample student work rather than interview students individually is a strategy decision made by the school with the backing of the University, in order to avoid any potential confusion regarding the role of external examiners in the marking process, and to avoid the focus being placed on studio at the expense of other course components. All work is available for inspection if required.

The Board thanks the External examiners for their candour during an informative and positive discussion. As far as procedures are concerned, the Externals commented that while they were content with sampling work, they would welcome more direct contact with those who teach. Attendant documentation could be opaque and more evidence of process in student work would have been useful. Although the School is assiduous in providing written responses to externals' reports, this was not necessarily followed by action.

The following reflects the main points of the discussion:

- The examiners supported to the move to the new structure and the increased flexibility it brings. The School had responded well to the challenges of a complicated structural change, the distribution of teaching strengths throughout the School and the rediscovery of an ethos that is more compatible with its spirit. There was now a strong core team and the Externals encouraged the School to teach to its strengths, allowing all staff to develop their own interests. The School was in transition and there was great potential for development. Given

the solid grounding of the School and its programmes, it could afford to take greater risks.

- The Externals acknowledged the challenge faced by the School in setting the new benchmark for Part One. The examiners hoped that their comments would help the School to adjust years one and two appropriately in order to prepare students for and to support year 3. Externals were confident that threshold standards were appropriate.
- At present there is a lack of natural progression from year 5 to Year 6. The full potential of year 6 and the unit system have yet to be realised, not least in terms of research. Ideologically level 6 could be strengthened. The inclusion of design philosophy in year 5 and the dissertation in year 6 is a major encouraging development. The Externals considered that the research methods module in stage 5 should give year 6 an intellectual rigour which had not existed before and encouraged the School to allow the units to form a more specialist bias. Design philosophy could be more connected to the design studio.
- The School could make more of its regional bias; taking critique of the region to a deeper level. This might be an interesting way of creating a unique profile.
- The School retains its strength with regard to technology; technology and environment are integrated into the design work.; however the school could take a more strategic view on this.
- Interpretation of cultural context could be more profound.
- The School should exercise vigilance with regard to over-editing of portfolios.

- More consistent and useful documenting of process would be welcome.
- Wider attitudes towards architecture would be welcomed.
- The exploration of spatial elements using models could be of a higher standard.

**13.8 Arrangements for Monitoring Professional Experience**

The Board noted the reappointment of a dedicated PSA to support post-part 2 students, following the retirement of the previous postholder. Post part-1 students also have a dedicated PSA. Both PSAs are supported by an administrator.

Students must register with the Professional Studies Adviser and complete PEDR returns. Students are responsible for finding their own placements. The PSA endeavours to visit all year out students where possible. Year out and post-part 2 students considered that they had been well prepared before embarking on professional practice and well supported throughout. However, it was noted that a significant number had been unable to find placements for the coming year because of the economic climate. It is technically possible to proceed directly to Part Two without a year out and the PSA has the discretion to approve alternative placements or placements overseas. Ultimately, however, all students will have to log 24 months' approved professional experience before being eligible for Part Three. The Post-Part Two PSA provides preparation and guidance for candidates for the Part Three examination, administered Scotland by APEAS. The School is actively involved in APEAS.

**13.9 Students**

The Board was pleased to meet representatives of all years of the programme, including year out students and recently-graduated students. The students appear happy and confident, enthusiastic and articulate. All years of the programmes were represented, including graduates. Students expressed support for the School. The Board commends the enthusiasm and growth of the student society, 57'10. This is proactive in organising lecture series and other events and is the main, and very successful, vehicle for integration between students.

The Board acknowledged the students efforts in supporting the programmes' structural changes to the 3+2 system. This year's stage 3 students reported found it a challenging year, as they were the first to reach Part One under the new structure. The learning curve had been considerable but overall they had found it enjoyable. Students could see the benefit of the change in increased flexibility, allowing increased mobility for students between Part 1 and Part 2 and bringing new ideas into the studio. The staff had been very supportive.

In the students' opinion technical support is on the whole good and timed appropriately to inform design. They receive specialist external help from engineers and the core environmental and structural engineering staff are readily available.

Among the School's strengths the students noted the opportunity to explore the world in 3D., the ethos of the School and university, the School's vision, pursuing a creative subject, the opportunity to meet people (whether fellow students, architects, alumni), 57' 10 architecture society, the technical nature of the programme, and the

strong basis of knowledge for practice. Among improvements that could be made were the level of communication and feedback between staff and students, the inconsistency of software provision, some aspects of in School workshop provision and the lack of a sense of conclusion to their studies. The Board advises that the School reviews its communications methods with students, as this seemed to be of concern to a number of the student body.

**13.10 Staff;**

The staff meeting was very well attended by full-time, part-time, visiting and honorary professors, specialist staff from within the school and allied disciplines. The Board thanks the staff for the open and frank discussion.

The School has now established a strong core team, following a challenging but extensive recruitment exercise which has bolstered by the staff complement and, by common report, helped to revitalise the School. In addition to this, three honorary professors (soon to be four) have been appointed to the staff, chiefly to be involved with the final year of Part Two; the fourth will probably also be involved at Part One. Part-timers feel part of the staff team and are involved in planning. The Visiting Professors attend one day per week.

Staff recognise that much remains to be achieved but consider that they are now in a strong position. New staff felt that they would be given the opportunity to contribute from the start and develop areas in which they have an interest. Part-time staff are consulted and feel part of the team. The overall feeling among staff is one of enthusiasm and they commented on the enthusiasm and receptiveness of their students.

The structural changes to the programmes are viewed positively, not only with regard to increasing student mobility and injecting new perspectives into the Part Two, but also enabling the School more effectively and accurately to benchmark itself against other institutions. Staff have been undertaking benchmarking visits to other schools to help them adjust each stage appropriately; the school has also shared studio staff with another school.

The current SSR is 1:18.9; this represents an improvement (e.g. in 2006/7 the SSR was 1:23.7). The School anticipates that this will be maintained in the forthcoming academic session.

**13.11 Research;**

The School's performance in the 2008 RAE was commendable and showed the developing strength of the school. The Board understood that this would be recognised in supporting the school. The University wishes to prioritise areas in which research has the potential to attain international recognition; architecture being one of them. The University is moving towards creating three research institutes which should create critical mass and enable it to support young researchers. It may also be possible to launch joint bids for projects.

All disciplines at the University engage proactively with their relevant profession in advisory capacities; this also improves the academic programmes and the employability of graduates. The University wishes to increase its engagement with the professions and industry. Block grants have increased in size. Staff are supported in their interests. Many staff engage in consultancy which provides an additional source of income.

The scope for research to inform the validated courses is wide. Staff are relating their research to the research methods module with the intention that this will feed into the dissertation and perhaps ultimately to theses. The Board was encouraged to see this development and hopes that this will lead to independent dissertations of an appropriately critical standard, as appropriate to the award level. The opportunity for this was noted enthusiastically by the students.

**13.12 Equal Opportunities:**

The University is committed to widening access. It is the first school in Scotland to have an Associate College in Aberdeen, through which it obtains one third of its undergraduates. The University's efforts in this area have been recognised by the Scottish government.

The Board noted the strong and developing relationship with its overseas partner institution and the provisions for direct entry.

The Board was assured that equal opportunities policies are in place. The profile of the staff body is very international. There is recognition that the gender balance among the staff could be improved. Staff recruitment on the whole has reportedly been challenging, which has had an impact on the University's wish to improve diversity. This is being monitored.

The Board was confident that the institution took steps to ensure that SENDA legislation was complied with.

**13.13 Resourcing and facilities;**

The School is well supported by the institution and financial systems were reported to be efficient. The financial model is transparent. Knowledge transfer and the School's connections with local authorities may also become more of a resource.

Among the benefits of the School are the real opportunities presented to the students by its facilities. The School is beginning to explore and understand this. The Board was impressed by the facilities both within the Scott Sutherland School and those available to architecture students at the Gray's School of Art. Students have access to all facilities at the Gray's School of Art. Art school staff are very willing to help architecture students but relatively few avail themselves of these facilities.

- *Studios*

Despite overall pressure on space, studios are spacious and appropriate. Students considered that studio sizes were appropriate as long as the present class sizes were maintained. Approximately half the students work regularly in the studios. Crits are held in corridors due to the lack of space. Students would welcome longer opening hours. The students make good use of courtyard space for building larger models. There is a very good art shop in the School of Art.

- *Workshop*

Students have access to workshops both in the Scott Sutherland Building and the Gray's School of Art which is in an adjacent building. Students commented that the Gray's workshop opening hours and equipment were better than those in the Scott Sutherland building. The Scott Sutherland building normally closes at 10pm, which is extended to 11pm at hand-in times. The Gray's School

of Art is very well equipped and has excellent support from technical staff with specialist inductions offered as appropriate. The Board encourages the staff to ensure that architecture students are fully aware of the provision and make provide specific activities to make better use of it. The Board considers that the Gray's workshops are a valuable resource for architecture students and would encourage the University to ensure that this is maintained.

- *Printing and IT*

The School's facilities are supported by two full-time specialist staff. There are 120 PCs available for student use. Students may also make use of Mac computers in the Gray's School, with permission.

The Board considered that the School was well resourced in terms of plotters and computers. While the majority of students have their own laptops, students commented that printing could be expensive and that the facilities were under pressure. Similarly the IT facilities were also under pressure, particularly at the end of the year. There were also inconsistencies in software between different computers. Wireless printing facilities would be welcomed. The University has developed an interactive e-learning platform (CampusMoodle).

- *Library*

The Georgina Scott Sutherland Library houses the architecture, art, nursing, business and applied social sciences collections and is reportedly well-used by students. Opening hours are reasonably generous. Students considered that the library was good. The Library, although housed in a relatively new, purpose-built building, may be moved again. The new masterplan includes a 'Learning Tower'. The library sees the co-

location of the campus as an opportunity, for example to undertake a review of stock.

All librarians have specialist areas but are available to answer all queries. The budget is based on FTE numbers. The acquisitions policy is flexible; liaison librarians receive reading lists every year and also ad hoc requests throughout the year. The print collection comprises 20000 volumes in architecture, construction and related disciplines. The greater part of the collection is still in print form, although electronic formats and e-books are used where available. Library systems, including e-books, can be accessed externally by staff and students. There is also a dvd, video and slide collection, which the Library intends to digitise as copyright allows.

The online library catalogue is being upgraded. All students receive a library induction and they library also runs classes in literature searches. The library also takes a lead in the new Research Methods module. A full service of interlibrary loans and access are operated (eg SCONUL access scheme (Society of College, National and University Libraries). PCs, printers, photocopiers and scanners are also available.

The Library also subscribes to a wide range of databases and journal collections including Academia, Avery Index, Digimap, British Standards, Emerald, images database. The University has recently established an Institutional repository OpenAir@RGU in which staff can deposit material; this is a relatively new resource.

**14. Documentation for the visit**

Before the visit the School provided all information in the Questionnaire and Supplementary Information as required under the Validation Procedures.

In the Base Room the School provided:

- Architecture Course Team Minutes
- School Academic Board minutes
- Staff-student Liaison Committee minutes
- School Senior Team minutes
- Faculty Quality Enhancement Sub-Committee minutes
- Faculty Management Group minutes
- Institution-led Subject Review
- Research strategy
- Staff Development Strategy
- Pedagogy Strategy
- School Plan 2008-9
- Annual Appraisal reports 2005-2008
- Detailed course descriptors for all validated programmes
- Teaching plans stages 1-6
- Course Timetables 2008-9
- Exam papers and coursework assignments stages 1-6 2008/9
- Studio project briefs stages 1-6 2008/9
- SCQF Document
- Scottish Architecture Policy
- RGU Academic Regulations
- RGU Academic Quality Handbook
- 2009 Undergraduate and Postgraduate Prospectuses
- RGU Annual Review