
School of Environment & Development
Faculty of Built Environment
Sheffield Hallam University
City Campus
Sheffield
S1 1WB

Report of the Exploratory Board Visit 13-14 November 2008
New Part Two Programme – Postgraduate Diploma in Architecture
Confirmed by the Education Committee of the RIBA 6 July 2009

Membership of Board: Kathy Gal (Chair)
Derek Cottrell (Vice Chair)
Roosje Barr
David Simister
Mark Physass
Hilary Holloway
Stewart Dodd

Sarah Bedding (Secretary)

(This visit was carried out in tandem with the re-validation of Part One)

1. At its meeting on 6 July 2009 the Education Committee of the RIBA confirmed:

Candidate Course Status for Exemption from Part Two of the RIBA Examinations of the Postgraduate Diploma in Architecture

The designation 'Candidate Course for Validation' implies that the proposals for the course are judged to have the potential to meet RIBA criteria, if implemented as anticipated. It is not, however, equivalent to Validation, which can only be granted once the standards of the work produced have been assessed and found satisfactory.

2. Advice to the School

The Board thanks the staff and students for their kindness, hospitality and openness during the visit. The Board welcomes the development of this new programme, believing that a wholly part-time and practice-based course will provide a new focus for postgraduate architectural provision. The best students will benefit from the synergy created between academic learning, work-based learning and peer learning. This is a welcome development in architectural education and a positive contribution to the profession.

The strong points of the course provision are:

- innovative course design
- integration of learning and practice
- the addressing of student debt issues
- university support for the course
- experienced and dedicated staff team
- effective use of blackboard technology

The Board would like to bring to the School's attention the following issues and queries, which it hopes will be helpful to the staff and students in the development of the course and towards achieving validation.

- 2.1 The Board advises the School to think carefully about the implication of a growing cohort. The innovative features of the course could be a challenge as numbers increase. Therefore the Board advises the School to establish formal mechanisms for tracking all students through the diploma.
- 2.2 The Board recommends the School carefully consider the six year option. As numbers grow it may become harder to track individual learning through six stages, and it is important that the six year route does not become a safety net for those who do not complete the faster route.
- 2.3 The School should ensure that extra resources are available as the cohort requires.
- 2.4 The Board strongly recommends that the School appoints a second external examiner for the Post Graduate Diploma.

3. Background

Sheffield Hallam is the third biggest provider of practice based learning in the UK. The Postgraduate Diploma in Architecture is delivered by the Architecture Subject Group, a part of the Division of the Built Environment within the Faculty of Development and Society. The Subject Group currently delivers undergraduate courses in Architecture and Environmental Design and Architectural Technology, and has done so for the last ten years. A first postgraduate course, the MSc in Technical Architecture, was launched in 2006/07. The practice based learning approach of the new Postgraduate Diploma is a very challenging but also innovative model. The Subject Group believes there are many advantages to combining learning and working. Practice based learning is embedded in the University's ethos.

4. Course structure and content

The Postgraduate Diploma curriculum is designed to progress sequentially across three years. The first two years develop distinct and cumulative skills that provide a platform for the final thesis project. A fourth year of study will be required for those wishing to gain a degree at Masters level. The course curriculum is organised into two distinct semesters in each year. Both Semesters carry 40 credits. The Design Studio modules in Semester 2 provide the academic core of the year and will explore themes and agendas that in turn set the context for learning in other modules. In Years 1 and 2, there will be two design projects in each studio module. A core project will run throughout the second semester but this will be punctuated with a spontaneous interim project to provide architectural and education counterpoint.

Each Design Studio module is associated with and preceded by its preparatory Project Research & Analysis Module. A studio project theme will be nominated at the start of the year in Year 1 and Year 2 and these preparatory modules will promote creative and relevant project research and brief development. The subject of the final year thesis project will be negotiated with an allocated tutor.

The programme recognises the need for flexibility in adapting to the differing situations of the students coming on to the course. While it is anticipated that most students will be working in practice whilst attending the course, and that this practice should form a foundation for academic learning, the need has been recognised for a provision for learning and assessment where no practical experience is possible. Despite the flexibility of the course structure there is some essential sequence to the study route. Design Studio modules are sequential and therefore pre-requisites to each other.

There are both full-time and part-time routes through the programme. The full-time route is aimed at students currently working in practice: they will be required to attend University for one day a week and be expected to complete the course in three years. The part-time route is aimed at students not working in practice, although they will also be required to attend the University one day a week. Work-based support is not possible and completion of this course might be expected in four years. The programme may be completed in a minimum of three and a maximum of six years. Each student will have their individual learning path negotiated at the start of the year.

The extended delivery profile of the course means that the 'year out' may be taken concurrently with the three years of study. Therefore a student graduating from Part One may immediately embark on this programme without the normal year out in practice. The advantages of the practice delivery include the reduction of debt amongst students, the development of critical thinking and the emphasis on peer learning.

"Blackboard" is used as the primary communication forum for the course. All modules have their own sites and most will run a blog to promote ongoing group engagement and to provide a common arena to address queries. The Board was able to see the Blackboard resources being used by the students.

4.1 Progression and exit awards

The Postgraduate Diploma course is intended to provide architectural education to RIBA/ARB Part 2 level. To achieve Part 2, a student must also, in addition to this course, undertake a recorded year out in practice following Part 1. The extended delivery of this course means that the 'year out' may be taken concurrently with the three years of stud, provided the student fulfils the requisite time in practice. The student will record and reflect on their work experience to comply with the 'year out' requirements but concurrent with this programme. The final award will be calculated from the weighted average of all modules in Year 2 and Year 3. The minimum pass mark is 40% in all modules. The course offers scope for learning through practice to be integrated into the course assessment in the final two years. Assessment of practice based learning allows projects in practice to be used as the context for the course assignments. There will be clear differentiation between what has been carried out in day-to-day practice and where the essential supplementary study and learning has been carried out. Module learning outcomes will need to be demonstrated. Early steps will be taken to plan ahead and work with both academic staff and employers to identify projects in practice that will provide a suitable learning framework.

4.2 Recruitment/Admissions

The short term target intake figure is 15 students. A steady state of 25 students is included in the current business plan which relies upon additional studio space.

4.3 Research

The development of the post graduate course has helped raise the research profile of the Subject Group. The development has provided a platform for staff to teach and develop their own understanding of higher level studies. It allows students to expand their own studies to doctoral level. The Board was interested to learn of the work of one member of the part-time staff on research in the use of public spaces. The Board considered that, in the future, research activities will complement the course.

5. Student Meeting

The Board was able to meet 4 out of the 6 students on the Postgraduate course, and was pleased to note a good gender balance amongst the students.

The students were forthcoming, honest and open and the Board was impressed by their energy and attitude. The students were enthusiastic about the programme and clearly had confidence and trust in the institution, had belief in and ownership of the course and were looking forward to discussions with staff about the shape the future years of the programme. It was clear to the Board that the students felt that course addressed a need for flexibility in postgraduate study, and that the autonomy of learning was recognised and appreciated by the student body.

Many of the students had attended Sheffield Hallam as undergraduates and were attracted by the practice-based learning aspect of the course and the alternative approach that SHU offers. The students also praised Sheffield as a city for providing an exciting place to study and felt that Sheffield is a creative, genuine and relatively crime-free city providing an interesting backdrop in which to study design. The city itself is moving forward, with Architecture as a prevalent theme.

The students felt privileged to be part of such a small group and appreciated the benefits that this brings. All the students praised the support they had received from the staff and commented that the small numbers had helped provide the base for a good team ethic. The students recognised in particular the hard work that the staff put in to ensure that the practices were sufficiently interacting with the students.

Students were frank about the challenges presented by being the first cohort on a new programme. It had lived up to their expectations both by being hard work and also very enjoyable.

Students were content with the resources, considering that there was still sufficient space despite the rising numbers. IT facilities were considered good. Students were also content with the level of staffing and access to staff.

There is a student society, which is chiefly concerned with social events but also invites guest lecturers to speak. There is a student representative council.

6. Staff Meeting

The Board met the past and present programme leaders for the Postgraduate course. They explained that the rationale of the Postgraduate course was aimed at expanding the learning environment and that the culture of learning is core. The learning outcomes, and the thesis conclusions, allow the students to take ownership of their learning. The objectives of the course include empowering the students in respect of their learning agendas and to examine the social agenda of sustainability.

The Board also met the members of the entire staff body. The Board found the staff to be open and honest, enthusiastic and committed, clearly seeing the opportunities and challenges presented by the new programme. There is evidence that they work well as a team. The staff team benefited from strong leadership from the programme co-ordinators and the Board was pleased to learn of the introduction of appropriate specialists to the staff team.

The Board was also able to meet the External Examiner to the course. The Examiner praised the flexibility of the model of the Postgraduate course, and in particular the capacity of the programme to allow students to learn and progress at different speeds. The Examiner recognised that the economy challenges and was likely to have a significant impact on the course but considered that the course is a worthwhile programme for the profession. The School is ready to take on the challenge of the Postgraduate course, and hopes its implementation will benefit and inform the undergraduate course. The Examiner praised the staff team and their dedication to the programme.

7. Resources

The Board was impressed by the resourcing of the course. The Board was able to visit the dedicated studio space in Owen Room 328 for the Postgraduate students which currently houses 14 workstations. Across the Subject Group, core software is provided and maintained centrally, and a wireless network is operated across the campus allowing students great flexibility of access to IT services. The Resources Room based in Norfolk 406 is in close proximity to the Design Studios but is available to all students in the Faculty.

The Board was impressed by the Subject Group's commitment to the renewal of computer equipment every four years and the availability of AutoCAD on all computers on the School network.

The Board commends the Library provision on level 5 of the Adsetts Centre, which it considers very impressive. Following the closure of the Psalter Lane campus in 2008, the entire architecture collection is now housed in the Adsetts Centre. The Centre is well equipped with study spaces, both for individuals and groups, and provides both silent and quiet work areas. Students appeared to use the space enthusiastically, making use of the laptop provision and the relaxation areas including the coffee shop. The Subject Group benefits from a dedicated subject librarian and very helpful staff. The budget for Architecture is generous and the Librarian is able to satisfy the lecturers' requests for new acquisitions. The Adsetts Centre holds approximately 10,000 titles in Architecture, Fine Art and Design. Students have access to around 2000 print journals and 700 electronic journals. The University has a programme for increasing the number of electronic book titles and e-journals. All students receive

library induction sessions together with Information Literacy sessions from their subject advisor in using the University's electronic information resources.

The students have a high regard for the studio provision at the University. Access to the studios is available 24 hours a day with security controlled by central University reception. The undergraduate studios may be used by the post graduate students when space and timetables permit. Students confirmed that there is not always enough space to accommodate all students, but the studio culture is exciting and vibrant. The Course Team is mindful of student numbers increasing and the pressure that would place on studio space. Workshops on Level 0 of the Harmer Building are accessible 9-5 Monday to Friday.

8. Documentation

Prior to the visit the School supplied a complete programme specification. Upon request, clarification was given and supplementary information was provided. The Board was satisfied with the documentation.

The following documentation was provided by the School prior to the visit:

Course Handbook
Supplementary Information
Definitive Document
Questionnaire