

Royal Institute of British Architects

**Report of the RIBA Visiting Board
to the Plymouth School of
Architecture and Design**

Confirmed by the RIBA Education Committee 17 September
2008

University of Plymouth

**Part One: Bachelor of Arts with Honours in
Architecture**

**Part Two: Graduate Diploma in
Architecture**

**Part Three: Certificate in Architectural
Professional Practice**

Date of Visiting Board: 28- 29 February 2008

1. Information about the courses

1.1 Courses offered for revalidation:

Plymouth School of Architecture and Design: Bachelor of Arts with Honours in Architecture, three years full-time **(part one)**

Plymouth School of Architecture and Design: Bachelor of Architecture, two years full-time, three years part time **(part two)**

Plymouth School of Architecture and Design: Certificate of Architectural Professional Practice [CAPP], part time **(part three)**

1.2 Address of the institution where the courses are delivered

School of Architecture and Design
Faculty of Arts
Roland Levinsky Building
University of Plymouth
Drake Circus
Plymouth PL4 8AA

Tel: 01752 585000
Fax: 01752 585155
Web: www.plymouth.ac.uk

1.3 Name of awarding body
University of Plymouth

1.4 Name of head of School
Mike Stevenson

1.5 Name of head of architecture
Jeremy Gould

2. Membership of the Visiting Board

2.1 The members of the RIBA Visiting Board for the visit on Thursday 28 to Friday 29 February 2008 were:

| | |
|-------------------|---------------------------|
| Erejuwa Duncan | (Chair) |
| Don Gray | (Vice Chair) |
| Kevin Davis | (student/graduate member) |
| Malcolm Hollis | (co-professional member) |
| Richard Patterson | |
| John Regan | |

David Gloster (Director of Education, RIBA) was in attendance as secretary to the Board.

NB: although there was no local nominee available, the Board remained quorate.

3. Procedures and 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 and effective from September 2003, and the *RIBA Criteria for Validation*, published March 2002, and effective from September 2003 and the '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.

4. Recommendations of the Visiting Board

4.1 At its meeting on 17 September 2008 the RIBA Education Committee confirmed **Continued validation** of:
Part One: Plymouth School of Architecture and Design, Bachelor of Arts with Honours in Architecture, three years full-time

Part Two: Plymouth School of Architecture and Design, Graduate Diploma in Architecture, two years full-time, three years part time

Part Three: Plymouth School of Architecture and Design: Certificate of Architectural Professional Practice, part time

4.2 The next full Visiting Board will take place in 2012.

5. Recommendation of the Visiting Board to the Commonwealth Association of Architects, the Construction Industry Council, and ARB re. the 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 course 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 parts one and two 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 special conditions of validation attached to the courses listed in 4.1.

9. Standard requirements of recognition

9.3 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 4.1.

10. Summary of the recommendations, advice, and commentary contained in the full report

10.1 The Plymouth School of Architecture and Design has recently moved from its former (ex NAAFI) premises at the Hoe Centre to the Roland Levinsky Building, a striking Henning Larsen/BDP designed building intended to provide a hub for community interests in a range of arts based activities, including architecture. The ground floor and upper galleries house Peninsula Arts, which is the cultural umbrella organisation for the University of Plymouth.

10.2 A new head of architecture (Professor Jeremy Gould) was appointed in 2005. Since his appointment, there have been significant reviews of both the BA Honours and

Graduate Diploma programmes, the further development of a structured programme of external lectures for students and staff (often in collaboration with the Plymouth Architecture and Design Society), and the definition of a new vision for the future of the School.

10.3 The School's strengths include:

- the recruitment of students with a good mix of academic skills on entry to the courses
- a body of experienced staff, complemented by new programme leader appointments
- a new emphasis on the investigation of European cities as a means of exploring urbanism
- a new landmark building in a central location, shared with students of Fine Art, Graphic Design, Art and Performance etc.
- good pastoral support for students
- established links to local practices
- good library facilities
- impressive workshop facilities

10.4 The Visiting Board 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 the recommendations, or provide the RIBA with a clear rationale for not doing so, may result in a course being conditioned by a future Visiting Board.

10.4.1 The Visiting Board warmly commends the university for its commitment to major investment in the Roland Levinsky Building, and the emerging role of this in the community. The Board concurred with recent external examiners' reports (reiterated in their meeting with panel members) regarding staff/student ratios. The Board

therefore welcomed the Vice Chancellor's commitment to staff resources in architecture, notably the upcoming appointment of two full time associate lecturers.

The Board however noted staff and student concerns regarding the new premises, and recommends that the university continue its constructive dialogue with architecture's academic community to ensure that appropriate accommodation be provided which addresses shortfalls in studio space, private office space for pastoral and other confidential consultations, and consider revised opening hours of the RLB congruent with the demands of the disciplines the building contains.

10.4.2 The Board commends the Head of School, Head of Architecture, and programme leaders for the coherent and positive development of the BA (Hons), Graduate Diploma, and CAPP courses. It was considered that these courses successfully built on the core values of the Plymouth School of Architecture and Design, but offered viable new lines of enquiry for students at both award levels.

The Board was also reassured that the RIBA recommendation (June 2004) in respect of issues surrounding the teaching of Cultural Context at Graduate Diploma level had been discharged, both by regular review of individual folios and the new, complementary programme of events (and academic modules) relevant to this area of the curriculum. The field trip and related project in Bilbao during the academic year 2006/07 was also considered by the Board to be a successful and relevant initiative addressing issues of Cultural Context.

However, the Board recommends that the Head of Architecture provide the RIBA with a review of the success of the new course modules at Graduate Diploma

levels, and a summary of how the academic issues arising have informed design studio activity. This report is to be submitted to the RIBA by 31 October 2009, such that it may be considered by the RIBA Validation and Education Committees prior to the RIBA mid term monitoring visits.

- 10.5 The Visiting Board offers the following advice to the School on desirable, but not essential improvements, which it is felt would assist course development and raise standards.
- 10.5.1 The Board advises that the Head of School and Head of Architecture consider a sustainable long term staffing plan for architecture, particularly for the Graduate Diploma. The development of a teaching assistant scheme utilising the talents of recent PSA graduates might be considered as one initiative addressing this issue.

11. Summary of previous Visiting Board reports

11.1 The last full Visiting Board to the Plymouth School of Architecture and Design took place on 13-14 February 2003. The Board recommended **continued validation** of:

Part One: BA (Hons) in Architecture (three years full-time)

and **continued validation with conditions** of:

Part Two: Graduate Diploma in Architecture (two years full-time)

Part Three: Certificate in Architectural Professional Practice (part time)

11.2 In its report, the 2003 Visiting Board recommended the following as a condition of recognition:

11.2.1 The School was asked to submit a progress report to the RIBA within three months, indicating how the concerns raised will be addressed. In addition, the School was to appoint a professional adviser to support the development of the part three programme. Finally, a revisit to the School was to be made by an RIBA subgroup in June 2004.

11.2.2 The Revisiting Board was asked to establish that lowest pass standards were appropriate for the Graduate Diploma in Architecture, and that students on this course demonstrated ability to apply their learning in environment, constructional and architectural technologies, and cultural context to design project work. Issues of cultural context were to be met consistently across all specialist pathways and design units available on the Graduate Diploma.

11.2.3 The Revisiting Boards of 17 June and 2 July 2004 confirmed that these conditions had been satisfactorily addressed.

12. Conditions

12.1 There were no special conditions of validation attached to the courses listed in 4.1

13. Commentary

13.1 **Critical self-appraisal; developments since last visit**
The critical self-appraisal set out in a clear and candid manner the many changes in the School since the appointment of Roland Levinsky as Vice-Chancellor, Professor Levinsky's untimely death, the appointment of Jeremy Gould as professor and subject head of architecture in 2005, and the move from the Hoe Centre less than a year ago.

The self-appraisal clarified the revisions to design studio structure throughout both parts 1 and 2, and the general shift to a more critical (and relevant) design perspective on urbanism, especially at Graduate Diploma level. Recent appointments (and upgraded posts) at part 2 and part 3, together with a focus on developing research activities, are clearly seen as helping to establish a new spirit in the School. There was an honest admission that the student body needs to become better travelled, both literally and intellectually.

The document is necessarily critical of the cultural and practical difficulties inherent in the move from the Hoe Centre, and the trials of exchanging endearing (although somewhat outdated) premises with a strong sense of place, for a more corporate - but very central - city location. There are concerns about ICT provision, both as an academic and functional provision on the campus, although it is simultaneously recognised that greater proximity to the facilities within the Faculty of Technology provides opportunities to engage with very different possibilities in design and representation.

The Board noted (with some concern) the comments regarding increasing staff/ student ratios, the preemptory reduction of Visiting lecturer provision, and the freezing of replacement posts.

Finally, the understanding that the School must act as a regional vortex for debate and development in architecture education in the broadest sense was well articulated, and must provide the *leitmotif* for the School in the future.

13.2 **Documentation and Arrangements for the Visit**

The documentation provided for Board members in advance of the visit was comprehensive and clear; the

Board faced some challenges in understanding recent revisions to the courses, but it was generally felt this was explained adequately.

The arrangements for the visit were good, with structured introductions to each teaching level; these clarified the organisation of the School and in particular, the changing ethos and structure of the Graduate Diploma course. The exhibition was comprehensive, and portfolios well organised and marked; these were accompanied by clear mark sheets for each level of the course.

13.2.1 *Record of academic portfolios sampled during the visit*

For the part one BA (Hons) programme, the Board requested and examined > 21 academic portfolios of work completed in the 2006/07 academic year, including:
 Year 1: 3 lowest pass, 2 middle pass and 2 high pass
 Year 2: 3 lowest pass, 2 middle pass and 2 high pass
 Year 3: 3 lowest pass, 2 middle pass, and 2 high pass

For the part two Graduate Diploma programme, the Board requested and examined > 14 academic portfolios containing both year five and year six work, including:
 Year 4: 3 lowest pass, 2 middle pass, and 2 high pass
 Year 5: 3 lowest pass, 2 middle pass, and 2 high pass.

For the part 3 CAPP programme, the Board requested and inspected 2 lowest pass, 2 middle pass, and 3 high pass submissions.

13.3 **Responses made to previous Visiting Board reports and external examiner comments**

The Board was confident that the School had acted effectively in response to comments made by the 2004 Revisiting Boards.

13.4 **Context of the courses within the wider provision of the School and faculty**

The School's base is within the Faculty of Arts of Plymouth University. Courses offered in the faculty include fine art, fine art and art history, design: illustration, design: photography, three dimensional design, product design, graphic communication with typography, and architectural technology.

13.5 **Detailed commentary on the course leading to the BA (Hons) Architecture: part one**

135.1 Clarity, validity, and achievement of course objectives
The objectives of the part one course were seen to be clear and valid. The academic portfolios viewed by the Board demonstrated that objectives were being achieved by students of all ability levels.

13.5.2 Course design and content
The course presents students with the opportunity to develop design skills through progressively more complex projects; students are taught in a classical year structure. The content of the projects was generally considered appropriate to developing students' skills, although the Board expressed some reservations about the housing scheme proposed for BA2; this appeared limited in ambition and execution.

The Board also understood that all modules treating cultural context had recently been revised, with the exception of BA3. Design skills at the award level were appropriate with some thoughtful and well represented work evident at the upper end of the marking. However, little documentation of the process of developing and refining formal responses to a site and building typology was apparent. It was also considered that architectural –

History and Theory needed to be considered as an influence on design work.

The Board considered the course structure offered adequate support to students of lesser ability, but that the intellectual abilities of some higher achievers might not be nurtured as effectively.

13.5.3 Quality and coverage of the syllabus (including balance and integration between design and taught course work)

The Board considered that, with the reservation that a fuller understanding of design process be more evident in studio work, there was reasonable integration between the constituent parts of the course.

Design

On the basis of the portfolios examined, the Visiting Board confirms that all graduates from the BA (Hons) Architecture are meeting the validation criteria in the area of Design.

The Board noted however that following an enthusiastic first year there was a loss of momentum in BA2, particularly in relation to the ambition and modernity of design projects. A number of projects evidenced a lack of formal and aesthetic elegance. Whilst the notion of students researching their brief by reference to planning and construction legislation was considered to offer some practical skills, the Board had concerns that this could contribute to unnecessarily proscribed design outcomes. Although there was a spread of results in this year, the upper end of the marking did not offer markedly different architectural outcomes to students achieving lesser grades. The Board considered that projects at this level needed to be carefully framed to retain student engagement, and ensure the progressive acquisition of relevant design skills.

Ambition of design projects was considered to be better addressed in BA3, with evidence of students being prepared to experiment and explore a broader range of possible outcomes.

Technology & Environment

On the basis of the portfolios examined, the Visiting Board confirms that all graduates from the BA (Hons) Architecture are meeting the validation criteria in the area of Technology and Environment.

The Board considered that despite a general emphasis on normative constructional solutions, BA design projects provided satisfactory evidence of the integration of technology with design.

However, given the facilities available nearby on the campus (print production, ceramics, timber and metalwork etc.) the Board considered that an approach to technology tuition where students engage with a broad range of production processes and making might assist insight into both construction and materials.

Cultural Context

On the basis of the portfolios examined, the Visiting Board confirms that all graduates from the BA (Hons) Architecture are meeting the validation criteria in the area of Cultural Context.

The Board expressed some concerns that Cultural Context should be more comprehensively addressed, encouraging students to develop an understanding of the breadth and diversity of contemporary architecture.

Communication

On the basis of the portfolios examined the Visiting Board confirms that all graduates from the BA (Hons) Architecture are meeting the validation criteria in the area of Communications.

Students demonstrated a reasonable range of communication skills, although these tended to reflect a rather pragmatic approach to CAD. Whilst the retention of some hand drawing at BA2 was considered to offer potentially interesting possibilities, the results at this level were not generally rewarding. The Board considered that a sophisticated approach to CAD was essential for the acquisition of professional skills appropriate to employment.

Communication work at the BA 3 award level was considered by the Board to represent an improvement over the preceding years, although there remained concerns that design intentions were sometimes compromised by a lack of technical expertise with the drawing programme.

Management, Practice, and Law

On the basis of the portfolios examined, the Visiting Board confirms that all graduates from the BA (Hons) Architecture are meeting the validation criteria in the area of Management, Practice, and Law.

The Board considered the content of the Professional Studies module appropriate to students' learning requirements at this level of the course, with delivery of the course systematic, and the variety in means of assessment well judged.

Preparation for Professional Experience

The head of architecture confirmed that all students are expected to take a year out, and that this often extends to

two years. Every year, the School organises two days of student led feedback commenting on their practical training, and discussing the principles of office management they had experienced. The School acknowledged its highly specific location might tend to limit the range of some students' practical training, with the observation that the staple of small practice projects did not necessarily suit acquisition of a rounded practical training. However, it was considered that this also motivated students to take greater initiative in the choice of their year out employment. It was agreed this had been beneficial for those individuals who had taken such steps.

Advice regarding employment opportunities in the UK and overseas is offered by the School, as well as supervision of the recording of practical training experience via the PEDR.

13.5.4 Progression within the course

From analysis of the cohort statistics, the School reported progression rates during the academic year 2006/07 as c. 83%, 71%, and 77% in years one, two and three respectively. Progression rates within BA2 over the 2005-07 period were lowest at an average of 76%, against BA1 progression of 80%, and a BA3 figure of 81%. The Board noted that overall progression within the course had improved significantly, rising from a figure of 42% in 2004-05 through 48% in 2005-06, to 58% in the academic year 2006-07.

The School acknowledged that because student applicants were not interviewed, intake could be uneven in quality. It was further confirmed to the Board that the architecture admissions policy was under review, with submission of electronic portfolios now being considered; students who

proved unsuited to the course were generally directed to other opportunities in the faculty.

13.5.5 Assessment

Assessment criteria and procedures throughout the part one course are clearly described in the student handbook, with separate descriptions of each component within the curriculum.

The School states in its local regulations a protocol potentially allowing compensation in the case of module components passed at a threshold as low as 30%. The Board learned from the School that there is no compensation for any modules of any credit rating that are mapped against the RIBA criteria. This includes all modules in stages 2 and 3. Modules of 20 credits or less may be compensated in Stage 1. The Board considered that more clarity in the School's documentation was needed regarding procedures for the compensation of marks to ensure that students had achieved competence in the full range of professional skills.

Whilst assessment of students' work generally seemed fair and threshold standards acceptable, the Board noted that assessments tended to be compressed in the middle band of achievement, with relatively little differentiation made in the marking of either weaker or stronger students.

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

Direct entry to level two A comprehensive APEL system is in place to enable direct entry. Entry to level three is not permitted.

13.6 Detailed commentary on the course leading to the Graduate Diploma in Architecture: part two

13.6.1 Clarity, validity, and achievement of course objectives
Although the distinctive features of the course are clearly stated in the current student handbook, the Board noted some overemphasis on the validation criteria as academic determinants. Additionally, verbal explanations of the course ethos placed design underpinned by a detailed examination of urbanism at the centre of the process. The handbook continued however to stress conservation and sustainability, although not to the exclusion of other concerns.

13.6.2 Course design and content
The Board considered that the introduction of a year structure in lieu of the previous programme pathways had been beneficial for student learning, with a greater sense of contemporary relevance in design outputs.

13.6.3 Quality and coverage of the syllabus (including balance and integration between design and taught course work)

Design

On the basis of the portfolios examined, the Visiting Board confirms that all graduates from the Graduate Diploma in Architecture programme are meeting the validation criteria in the area of Design.

The Board considered work in the award year was thoughtful, with sensitivity shown to working on both urban sites and in the landscape. Students had considered issues of micro climate, sustainability, street life, and ritual as influences on design projects, although more evidence of contemporary precedent studies as a further determinant of design could be appropriate.

Board members asked for clarification of the concept of ‘weak urbanism’ as a design ethos, learning that this is a quotation from Juhani Pallasmaa that represents one of

the theoretical positions of the teaching in the Graduate Diploma. The Board comments that other approaches could be considered to develop a more pluralistic approach to postgraduate design work.

Technology & Environment

On the basis of the portfolios examined, the Visiting Board confirms that all graduates from the Graduate Diploma in Architecture programme are meeting the validation criteria in the area of Technology and Environment.

Despite a general technical competence evident in the portfolios examined, the Board was concerned by student feedback suggesting that design projects were proscribed by pressures to resolve construction, resulting in an overly conservative approach.

With so many high quality facilities available on campus (print, ceramics, timber and metal machining, advanced composites etc.) the Board considered that postgraduate technology could be approached in a more creative way, encouraging students to focus on material properties. Central to this would be the School identifying projects reliant for their outcomes on facilities within the Faculty of Arts.

The Board noted that this initiative could be complemented by the involvement of Shaun Murray, the joint TQEF lectureship appointment made in 2007. The Board is aware, however, that this is a fixed term Faculty appointment and most of his time is allocated elsewhere in the Faculty.

Cultural Context

On the basis of the portfolios examined, the Visiting Board confirms that all graduates from the Graduate

Diploma in Architecture programme are meeting the validation criteria in the area of Cultural Context.

The absence of a conventional dissertation in postgraduate studies is instead addressed by the submission of separate, shorter written submissions connected to the vestigial themes of Conservation and Sustainability and the Humane City. The Board considered that the school should carefully monitor the standard of these shorter submissions to ensure that critical analysis and written communication skills are fully developed in all students.

The Board considered that with the new emphasis on urban design, these module titles were misnomers and required review. The Board further considered that the issues of cultural context arising from these studies could benefit from more articulation and expression in design projects.

The Board welcomed the increasingly Eurocentric focus of the course, the growing number of overseas field trips exposing students to relevant high quality contemporary architecture, and the resolution to encourage a broader intellectual focus to this aspect of the course.

Communication

On the basis of the sample of portfolios examined, the Visiting Board confirms that all graduates from the Graduate Diploma in Architecture are meeting the validation criteria in the area of Communication.

Whilst the Board considered that a more experimental and speculative approach to the representation of projects could be considered, the general level of communication skills was good. The Board encourages the School to develop student skills in representation across a broad range of 2- and 3-D media.

Management Practice & Law

On the basis of the portfolios examined the Visiting Board confirms that all graduates from the Graduate Diploma in Architecture are meeting the validation criteria in the area of Management, Practice, and Law.

The Professional Studies module addresses a range of pertinent professional skills, using a variety of assessments. Seminars successfully support the production of the essay component.

13.6.4 Progression within the course

The part two programme achieves variable progression rates. Comparing total intake of students to the incoming year against those passing the award year, overall completion rates in the period 2004-05, 2005-06, and 2006-07 are 83%, 63%, and 71% respectively.

13.6.5 Assessment: methods, content and coverage, relative weightings, standards achieved

Relevant assessment mechanisms are in place throughout the part two programme; the relative weightings of the components of the course were considered appropriate. Compensation is not permitted.

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

There have been no direct entrants to the second year of the Graduate Diploma in Architecture since 2002-03.

13.7 Detailed commentary on the course leading to the Certificate of Architectural Professional Practice: part three

13.7.1 Clarity, validity, and achievement of course objectives

The overall aims of the Certificate of Architectural Professional Practice (CAPP) were considered appropriate. The programme specification clearly sets out the aims, content, and learning outcomes of the course; there is a comprehensive explanation both of course mapping against criteria, and the means by which learning materials are distributed to candidates.

13.7.2 Course design and content

Following the last Visiting Board in February 2003 and the subsequent revisit in July 2004, an independent professional adviser was appointed to assist the School in a review of duration, delivery, and assessment methods of the Certificate. The adviser was retained until these changes were fully implemented, and has subsequently kept a watching brief on progress. Detailed reports from the professional adviser were available to consider; these tracked the changes to the course over a five year period.

The course is designed as a series of four one day seminars, structured to allow both discussion and teaching. The seminars follow candidates' initial submission of their PEDR record in December, and start in January of the next year; completion of the seminars is mid April. These are followed by final submission of the practical training record, employer's references, and professional experience evaluation. Two case study essays are submitted mid May, with two written examinations at the end of this month. Professional interviews occur in early July, with results published a fortnight later.

13.7.3 Quality and coverage of the syllabus

On the basis of the work sampled the Board confirmed that all the part three validation criteria were being met by all the graduates from the programme. The Board was

confident that standards were being set appropriately, and the minimum pass set at the correct threshold.

The Board considered that the notes, handouts, and other learning materials indicated a good coverage of the validation criteria for this programme. Examiners' questions confirmed that candidates were asked to demonstrate analysis and judgement of issues, rather than recital of narrative.

Discussions with local practitioners revealed considerable support for the course and its graduates, and a strong ongoing relationship between the School and practice.

13.7.4 Progression within the course

Both students on first and second stage practical training and candidates for the CAPP reported that they were well supported by the School. The Annual Programme Monitoring Committee allows both CAPP candidates and staff to jointly review any matters arising.

13.7.5 Assessment: methods, content and coverage, relative weightings, standards achieved

A minimum of 50% is required in each element of a module for successful completion of the course, with appropriate referral arrangements in place. Course procedures state that referral in any components of the assessment automatically require candidates to be re-interviewed.

13.8 **External examining arrangements**

The Board confirmed that the School had in place an experienced team of part one, part two, and part three external examiners, drawn from both education and practice. All design work at the external examination is reviewed, and taught course modules comprehensively sampled. The Board noted that, from 2006-07, not all

final stage BA Architecture students were interviewed by the external examiners. All final stage Graduate Diploma students were interviewed in 2006/2007. This policy remains in place. From 2007/2008 the School intends that all BA (Hons) Architecture finalists will be interviewed as long as numbers and resources allow.

The appointment and roles of part three examiners were considered to be clearly documented, and robust. There is a system of regular meetings attended by the examiners and CAPP programme manager; these are used to monitor feedback, consider marking standards and external examiners' reports, and develop examination questions.

The Board discussed the course with two professional examiners and held a teleconference with the external examiner; a strong team ethic emerged from this discussion, with a clear sense of the formal mechanisms in place to allow professional examiners to report to the external. Notwithstanding this reassurance, the Board considered that the external examiner's report would benefit from a more comprehensive communication of detail, while still working within the template of the university's report form.

All external examiners offered the Board a candid overview of the activities of the School, confirming their support for the recent revisions to course structure and content - particularly at part two. The new emphasis on design and urbanism at Graduate Diploma level was welcomed, although the examiners confirmed that there still needed to be greater appreciation of both cultural context and the theoretical discourse in design outcomes.

Generally, the view was expressed that students needed to be given greater confidence before they could consider a more experimental and speculative approach to design

work. One examiner suggested that over adhesion to the validation criteria in curriculum design had contributed to the conservatism in some students' work.

The examiners stated that a number of factors affecting outcomes were outside the School's control, notably the issue of intake targets. This was considered to have some effect on results, in that tutors were having to offer remedial teaching to weaker students to the possible detriment of higher achievers' ambitions; the examiners considered that this contributed to a compression of marks in the middle range.

Finally, the examiners expressed concerns that staff student ratios were rising, and already too high.

13.9 **Arrangements for Monitoring Professional Experience**

Students confirmed that they felt prepared for their year out. Because many are employed relatively locally, they are in contact with their School throughout their practical training. The callback days at the School were generally considered to offer a good opportunity for discussion of practical training. However, those students employed in London or other metropolitan areas considered that monitoring their years out was more problematic.

13.10 **Students**

The student meeting was attended by representatives of all years of both programmes, together with students on their first and second stage practical training, and those about to undertake the Certificate of Architectural Professional Practice.

Students confirmed that they had come to the Plymouth School because the size of the city and cohesion of the campus was appealing, and because the School was located

in an arts faculty. The presence of the sea and coast were also major influences.

Those students who had previously been in the Hoe Centre expressed concerns that the new building made communication within the student body harder, that there was less space dedicated to architecture, and that opening hours constrained the development of a studio culture. All students agreed though that the central location was an improvement ('the atmosphere in the first year studio is great'), and security much improved. Printing facilities were however unanimously described as inadequate ('pathetic'), and that there was 'a lack of understanding by the university of what architecture needs' in terms of space and resources.

Students also had concerns about the reduction of tutorial time ('not enough'), expressing the view that 'staff shortages have an effect on our work' and that 'too many students' on the course affected staff ('they're exhausted'). The contributions of the new postgraduate course leader were however universally praised; 'a legend', 'he's helped us all a lot'. A number of students stated they had specifically returned to the school for their part 2 because of the qualities of this course leader.

Asked whether there should be more experimentation in the School, students were unenthusiastic about projects that appeared to avoid resolution of a building and expressed a number of differing positions; 'we're critical regionalism', 'there are other ways of being innovative', 'everybody has to be realistic - we have to live in our work'. Conversely, a number of students stated that they 'would like to design away from the norm; there is a pressure not to be conceptual'.

Finally, the issue of technical resolution was considered to be a major determinant of outcomes. 'There is a level of fear because of the issue of constructional resolution', 'design has to align with technical parameters', 'external critics press us to simplify', and 'we do something easy because the [technical] information is readily available'. Some of this commentary was made in the context of critiques of student capability offered by local practitioners during the practical training stages.

13.11 Staff

Staff confirmed their input to the critical self-appraisal.

Some staff expressed the view that although the pastoral care offered by the university was very effective, the pressure to increase targets could result in weak students consuming a great deal of teaching time and energy. This affected the development of high achievers, although views were expressed that students were sometimes reluctant to accept intellectual challenges - a perceived failing of the secondary School system ('no lateral thinking is encouraged'). There were also comments made that 'firefighting has subsumed the push for new ideas' in the School, and that 'we need to find ways to kick ourselves, and take more risks'. Staff confirmed though that 'the School had taken a neutral position on Diploma pedagogy, but we're more explicit about what we want now'. The Board considered that the engagement with a number of leading UK practices was a positive contribution to educational delivery and development.

The staff characterised current work as 'a quiet architecture, about beauty not fashion', 'the School's agenda is grounded'.

Time for teaching was acknowledged as being 'under pressure; we're very dedicated and work beyond our

hours'. The move from the Hoe Centre had posed challenges with a lack of provision of small office spaces essential for private conversation with students; 'guerilla occupation' was considered the only option for staff to establish usable work areas. Finally, the staff confirmed their positive support for the 'new business dynamism' evidenced in the Roland Levinsky Building, and asked that the university 'recognise staff capability as a resource', but in the context of architecture 'managing our own budgets, and our own spaces'.

13.12 Research

Although research activity at the School has historically been modest, the head of architecture and new Vice Chancellor confirmed that the Faculty of Arts had strong RAE grades in some areas (e.g. Art History is rated 5). This success would be used as a basis for developing research in architecture which, in the first instance, might reflect themes emerging from teaching and the new agendas emerging from the Graduate Diploma.

The recent appointment of Dr Daniel Maudlin, although spanning associated courses in art and design, has been instrumental in an architecture summer School run by PSA. This involves students from the University of Pennsylvania Visiting the city for a period of time. The head of architecture also described his own work for Docomomo investigating the 1950s Modernist plan of Plymouth, and the cooperative initiative working with the Faculty of Technology to develop the Institute of Design and Creative Technology.

Finally, it was hoped that the established work in the School on sustainability and conservation could also be drawn upon to develop research outputs

13.13 Equal Opportunities

The university has a comprehensive equal opportunities policy. The Board noted that although gender representation at BA1 in 2006-07 was quite well balanced, with women representing nearly 40% of the intake, this declined to 32% by the degree award year, and only 14% by the conclusion of the final year of the Graduate Diploma programme. Recruitment was generally dependent on a good response from applicants in Devon and Cornwall; in 2006-07, only 7% of BA (Hons) students were from overseas. In the same period, there were no non-UK students on the Graduate Diploma programme.

13.14 Resourcing and facilities

General

The School has accommodation on the second, fifth, and sixth floors of the Henning Larsen designed Roland Levinsky Building. The building is centrally located in Plymouth, with close proximity to many main campus facilities.

Studios

BA1 occupy the fifth floor exclusively, although this space is also used for lectures and seminars. Graduate Diploma students on the second floor have dedicated studio space, with good natural daylight. All studios have good views across Plymouth, and are supplied with PCs and student workstations. The Board considered that the specification of the studio spaces (including suspended floors and carpet tiles) was not ideally suited to a studio environment, although understood that architecture staff had not been involved in the detail resolution of the studios.

IT

In terms of the provision of PCs, both in the studio spaces and elsewhere in either the Levinsky Building or main

campus, IT facilities appeared acceptable. However, the Board had serious concerns that relatively compressed opening hours in the library where the main printing for architecture takes place, places unnecessary pressure on both students and staff.

The Board further noted that software provision in architecture could be enhanced both to develop students' awareness of the possibilities of high end programmes, and take advantage of the CNC production techniques available nearby on the campus.

The critical self-appraisal makes it clear that the School understands the need for an urgent review of IT provision, and the Board would encourage the School to develop a clear strategy for this.

Workshop

The Board was given a tour of workshop facilities, mostly located nearby in the Faculty of Technology's Scott and Brunel Buildings; architecture students have access to the majority of these workshops, both on a walk in basis and by appointment. An induction scheme, which was complimented by the Regional Health and Safety Executive, is available for all students who wish to use these facilities.

Library

Library provision was considered good by many students. The library is about 100 metres from the Roland Levinsky Building, and appears well staffed and organised. The Board noted however that, due to the transfer of departments to the main campus, a state of reorganisation was evident.

The architecture and design collection is arranged in the basement, with engineering book stock on the second

floor. The Board advises that the School regularly review the scope of the collection to ensure that the broadest research opportunities are offered to students.

While some computer facilities offered by the library enjoy 24 hour access, the building generally has restricted opening hours; this is of concern to students who often require printing outside normal working hours. The Board considered the School should review these arrangements to balance students' need for good time management against the provision of an appropriate service.

14. Attachments

- 14.1 Prior to the visit, members of the Visiting Board received:
- critical self appraisal
 - questionnaire containing information on admissions, student statistics, policy on equal opportunities, and staff CVs
 - supplementary information
 - mapping of BA and Graduate Diploma programmes against RIBA/ARB part one and part two criteria respectively
 - mapping of Certificate of Architectural Professional Practice against RIBA/ARB part three criteria
 - external examiners' reports for BA, Graduate Diploma in Architecture, and the CAPP together with PSA responses
 - student handbooks for BA, Graduate Diploma in Architecture, and the CAPP for 2006-07 and 2007-08
 - external examiner CVs
 - University of Plymouth academic regulations 2006-07
- 14.2 In the base room the following additional documentation was made available:

- miscellaneous Faculty of Arts prospectuses
- BA course materials
- Graduate Diploma in Architecture course materials
- CAPP course materials

A networked PC was provided to allow the Board to consider documents available on the university's intranet.