

Royal Institute of British Architects

**Report of the RIBA Initial Visiting
Board to the University of Ulster
Confirmed by RIBA Education Committee
27 September 2006**

**School of Art & Design, Faculty of Arts,
Belfast Campus**

Part One: BA (Hons) Architecture

Date of Visiting Board: 29 - 30 June 2006

1. Information About the Course

1.1 Courses offered for initial validation

Part One: Bachelor of Arts (Hons) Architecture (three years full-time)

1.2 Address of the Institution where the course is delivered

School of Art & Design
University of Ulster
Belfast Campus
York Street
BELFAST
BT15 1ED

Tel: 028 902 67252

Fax: 028 902 67356

W: www.ulster.ac.uk

1.3 Name of Awarding Body

University of Ulster

1.4 Head of Architecture

Professor Hisham Elkadi
h.elkadi@ulster.ac.uk

2. Membership of the Visiting Board

2.1 The members of the RIBA Visiting Board for the visit on Thursday 29 and Friday 30 June 2006 were:

David McClean	(Chair)
Professor Jim Low	(Vice Chair)
Erejuwa Duncan	
Daniel Rosbottom	
Hilary Holloway	(Lay Member)
Norman Hutchinson	(Regional Rep)
Kevin Davis	(Student Member)

Dr. Chris Ellis (Acting Director of Education, RIBA) was in attendance as Secretary to the Board.

(Norman Hutchinson was unavoidably absent from the Board's activities on 30 June, but the Board remained quorate throughout.)

Claire Browning acted as the Institutional Facilitator for the visit.

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 Sept 2003, effective from September 2003 (as amended at RIBA Validation Committee 19.05.2005) and the "RIBA Criteria for Validation", published March 2002, effective from September 2003. For more information see

www.architecture.com

4. Recommendations of the Visiting Board, Confirmed by the Royal Institute of British Architects Education Committee on 27 September 2006.

4.1 At its meeting on 27 September 2006 the RIBA Education Committee confirmed:

Initial Validation of:

Part One: Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Architecture (three years full-time)

4.2 The next Visiting Board should take place in 2010.

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

5.1 The Visiting Board recommends to the Commonwealth Association of Architects that the CAA should accredit the Part One programme.

5.2 The Visiting Board was satisfied that the 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 course made a substantial contribution towards the achievement of the eleven points of the EU Directive.

6. Criteria for Validation

6.1 On the basis of the academic portfolios examined, the Visiting Board was satisfied that all graduates from the course listed in 4.1 satisfied all Part One Criteria for Validation (which are held in common by the RIBA for validation and the ARB for prescription).

7. Standards

7.1 A range of work from the previous year of the course listed in 4.1 above 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.

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 course 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 course listed in 4.1.

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

10.1 Background

10.1.1 The University of Ulster's new course in architecture was originally planned as a BSc programme to be based within the School of the Built Environment located at the University's Jordanstown campus some seven miles to the north of Belfast. In July 2003 the Vice Chancellor in conjunction with the relevant Deans and Heads of Schools decided to relocate the course to the University's School of Art & Design and for it to be a joint venture between the Schools of Art & Design and the Built Environment. Major factors in this decision were the benefits of co-locating the course with the School of Art & Design on the Belfast City campus and repositioning the course as a BA programme and thus distinct from the only other architecture programme in Northern Ireland, the BSc offered by Queens University, Belfast.

The first cohort of 59 students were admitted to the programme in September 2003. Subsequent cohorts have been limited to approximately 40 and this limit will remain for the duration of the current building works. An RIBA Exploratory Board to the course in April 2005 resulted in the award of Candidate Course status. The University requested the RIBA to organise an Initial Visiting Board for June 2006 immediately following the graduation of the successful students from the first cohort.

The two Schools jointly managing the architecture programme both achieved a grade 5 in the 2002 Research

Assessment Exercise. The course is thus being developed within a rich research culture which the course team are being supported to contribute to.

10.1.2 The Board identified the following specific strengths of the course:

- the serious commitment to the development of the discipline of architecture by the senior management of the University;
- the enthusiasm and commitment of the staff team;
- the international nature of the staff team;
- the breadth of expertise amongst the full-time staff team;
- the excellent staff-student relationships;
- an intelligent and committed group of students;
- the development of Belfast City campus which will provide an impressive home base for the course;
- the excellent facilities of the School of the Built Environment at the University's Jordanstown campus;
- the "Outside" project run for first and second year students with its focus on working with the general public, team working and practical construction skills;
- the start-up funding provided to support field trips;
- the efforts made to bring visual culture into the cultural context modules;
- the strong professional practice elements of the course;
- the University and course team's commitment to enhancing the diversity of its student population;

10.2 Recommendations

The Board has made the following recommendations to the Institution. 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.

10.2.1 The Board recommends that the staff team should look again at the assessment regime they employ for design work. The reconsideration should focus on the balance between formative and summative assessment and particularly in ensuring that there is absolute clarity in students' minds as to the nature of the assessment at various stages in the design process and the contribution made to the final module grade. The staff team should also look to benchmark their assessment procedures, not just in design, against other validated Part One courses.

10.2.2 The Board recommends that students are given more formal support regarding the protocols and strategies of assembling a portfolio of their work. This should focus on ensuring that the portfolio can be 'read' by an employer or Visiting Board member, but also on making sure that there is evidence of process in the form of sketch designs, good photographs of developmental models etc. The Board emphasises this latter point because of the course team's claims that a concentration on process is central to the programme's approach to design teaching

10.3 Advice

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

10.3.1 The Board found that the module descriptions, particularly those for the design units were overly prescriptive and could clearly limit the flexibility of the staff team in developing modified project briefs. The Board understands that the prescriptive nature of the module descriptions might have been an effort to ensure that Validation Criteria were being met. The Board believes that, given appropriate learning outcomes, Validation Criteria can be met without restricting the development of design briefs. The Board advises the course team to rewrite the module descriptors for the design modules to allow greater flexibility and the progressive development of design briefs.

10.3.2 The Board found that historical and cultural context was generally a strength of the course with some impressive taught courses and assignment outcomes in this area. The Board did not, however, see this as thoroughly embedded in student design work as it might have expected. The Board felt that this was possibly because few of the design projects start at a sufficiently early stage in the design process to allow students to engage as thoroughly as they were clearly capable of doing with the widest range of contexts and precedents. The Board advises the course team to investigate how historical and theoretical context can be more thoroughly integrated into the design project work.

10.3.3 The Board was extremely impressed by the facilities available in the School of the Built Environment at the University's Jordanstown Campus and by the commitment and enthusiasm of the staff there contributing to the architecture programme. The Board believes that the expertise of Built Environment staff and the facilities at Jordanstown are yet to be fully exploited. The Board thus advises the staff team to look for ways in which students can be challenged and supported to make use of the specialist Built Environment facilities and thus more thoroughly embed technology and environmental agendas in design work from the outset.

10.3.4 The Board encourages the staff team in their commitment to developing the strongest possible links between their developing research activities and their teaching. The Board supports the statement made by the Vice Chancellor to the Board that the University valued, not just RAE oriented research, but also activities supported by "third-way" funding. The Board advises the staff team to explore these possibilities particularly given the scope for work with development agencies in Belfast and the province.

10.3.5 The Board found the management structures for the architecture team to be complex, but working effectively. The University is advised to review the structures on a regular basis as the provision evolves to ensure that architecture is no more vulnerable to future changes (e.g. in research assessment regimes) than other areas of the university.

10.3.6 The Board was impressed by the support provided for the development of the programme by the Advisory Board of practitioners. The Board advises the School to retain this support mechanism as it seeks to achieve its aims of developing Part Two and Part Three provision.

10.3.7 Staff are advised to encourage students to take more advantage of their location within a School of Art & Design, with a view particularly to increasing the range of presentation techniques that they have at their disposal.

11. Summary of Previous Visiting Board Reports

11.1 The only previous RIBA Visiting Board to the University of Ulster was the Exploratory Board held on 12 October 2005. The Exploratory Visiting Board recommended:

- Candidate Course Status for Validation for Exemption from the RIBA Part One Examination be awarded to the BA (Hons) Architecture;

This recommendation was accepted by the RIBA Education Committee.

11.2 In making their recommendations the Exploratory Board commented:

- The Board appreciated the openness and honesty of the staff in discussing their aspirations for the course.
- The direction and context of the programme as articulated by the course leaders were clear and straightforward.
- The students' design experience and progression is on course to meet the criteria if developed in the way anticipated.

- The Board enjoyed meeting the student body whom they found intelligent, lively and engaging.
- There was a good studio atmosphere. Staff were approachable and staff and students displayed mutual respect.
- The exhibition was well presented and gave the Board a good overview of the structure of the course and student progression.
- The Board was mindful of the fact that the Department was operating on a building site with all the upheaval and uncertainty that that entails. The Department was commended for using the ongoing reconstruction as a basis for projects.
- The Board looked forward to seeing the work of the graduating cohort and the new facilities currently under construction when invited to return for a full Validation Visit.

12. Commentary

12.1 Self-Appraisal and Developments since the Last Visit

The Critical Self Appraisal provided for the Board provided a useful starting point for the Board's deliberations. It included a particularly useful SWOT analysis. The document was, however, as a whole overly descriptive. The Board benefited from the more detailed analysis presented by the staff team in their meeting with the Board and felt that some of this insight might have found its way in to the Self Appraisal.

The Board found the separate student appraisal really helpful and appreciated the effort that had gone into assembling this in a systematic and easily readable format.

No major changes had been made to the course since the Exploratory Board although substantial work had gone into developing the detailed implementation of the final year.

12.2 Documentation and Arrangements for the Visit

The documentation required for the Visiting Board had been supplied to Board members in good time to allow them to assimilate it before the Visit. Everything required by the RIBA procedures was made available although the documentation could have been more concise. There was evidence of "cut and paste" resulting in significant overlap in the contents of the various volumes received. Documents had also been supplied in advance which the Board would have been happy to have made available in the Board Room

The documentation supplied in the Board Room and with the portfolios was well organised and clearly presented. The Board appreciated having access to "module boxes" in addition to academic portfolios. The only request for additional documentation made during the visit (a detailed breakdown of admissions statistics) was dealt with promptly and efficiently.

The programme for the meetings and activities required by the Board was well organised. The support provided by the Institutional Facilitator in ensuring that the visit ran smoothly was particularly appreciated. The special arrangements to accommodate the availability of the External Examiners worked well. The exhibition was attractively structured and clearly laid out. The staff team might, however, have ensured that the academic portfolios

were complete before the visit; additional developmental materials were made available at a late stage in the board's deliberations.

12.2.1 Record of Academic portfolios sampled

BA (Hons) Architecture (Part One)

The Board examined the following academic portfolios from the 2005/6 academic year:

Year one: 3 lowest pass, 2 middle and 2 high pass (from a cohort starting the year of 42)

Year two: 3 lowest pass, 2 middle and 2 high pass (from a cohort starting the year of 45)

Stage three: 3 lowest pass, 2 middle and 2 high pass, plus a failed portfolio (from a cohort starting the year of 32)

Additional work from all years of the course was viewed in the End of Year Exhibition.

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

External Examiners have been in place since the very first year of the degree. The course has also benefited from the support of an Advisory Board made up of local and international practitioners. The University and course team have responded to comments by the External Examiners and the Advisory Board by, for example, developing increased links between technology teaching and the studios, reducing excessive complexity in some design modules and the provision of enhanced administrative support. Changes have also been made in response to student feedback over the three years of the course's operation, for example, the enhancement of IT facilities including printing, changes to the format of examinations and improvements to course handbooks.

12.4 Context of the courses within the wider provision of the Faculties and Schools

The architecture programme is jointly managed by the School of Art & Design (based in the Faculty of Arts) and the School of the Built Environment (based in the Faculty of Engineering). With architecture being physically located in the School of Art & Design it has been easy for staff from other programmes in the School such as design, fine art, Irish visual culture to contribute to the programme. Staff contributing to the programme from the School of the Built Environment are drawn from related disciplines such as surveying, structural engineering and building services engineering. It became clear to the Board during the visit that the architecture programme benefited from strong management support and committed teachers from both the two parent Schools and that the programme operated effectively despite the split site management. The Board found the management structures for the architecture team to be complex, but working effectively. The University is advised to review the structures on a regular basis as the provision evolves to ensure that architecture is no more vulnerable to future changes (e.g. in research assessment regimes) than other areas of the university.

12.5 Detailed Commentary on the Part One course:

Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Architecture (three years full-time)

12.5.1 *Clarity, validity and achievement of course objectives*

The stated overall aims of the University of Ulster BA (Hons) Architecture programme are to

- combine underpinning technical and contextual knowledge and skills with the development of professionally oriented design expertise;
- develop explicit, robust and innovative design skills;
- respond creatively and responsibly to the demands of a complex and changing profession;
- enrich the knowledge base by on-going research, giving an understanding of the theory and purpose of best practice and the self-confidence to participate in it;
- enable the needs of individual users and those of the wider community to be satisfied;
- create a responsive architecture with clear understanding of the means and context within which it is constructed and functions;
- develop a knowledge and critical awareness of disciplines related to architecture;
- develop a sound knowledge of structural and materials interaction and architectural details combining a wide range of components successfully with sustainable design;
- develop a wide knowledge base relating to ecology, sustainability, energy and materials interaction;
- develop the management skills to co-ordinate projects and act as part of a team;
- develop a wide range of communication and representation skills to present ideas appropriately and effectively to a range of stakeholders;
- develop a range of lifelong learning skills appropriate to the continued learning practices of professional life.

The Board found these aims to be clearly stated and valid, albeit ambitious. The Board felt that the seeds had been sown to allow full achievement of the aims in the future

given careful nurturing. Some of the more ambitious aims, however, including those relating to contributing to research and the development of management skills might more appropriately be realised through the Part Two course the staff team were developing.

12.5.2 *Course design and content*

The Board found the overall course structure to be appropriate and to be providing an effective vehicle for the achievement of the course aims. The course clearly satisfied the requirement that 50% of the credits were dedicated to design. The Board found, however, that the module descriptions, particularly those for the design units were overly prescriptive and could clearly limit the flexibility of the staff team in developing modified project briefs. The Board understands that the prescriptive nature of the module descriptions might have been an effort to ensure that Validation Criteria were being met. The Board believes that, given appropriate learning outcomes, Validation Criteria can be met without restricting the development of design briefs. The Board recommends that the course team look to rewrite the module descriptors for the design modules to allow greater flexibility and the progressive development of design briefs.

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

- *Design*

The Board was satisfied that all the Part One Validation Criteria in the area of Design were being met by all graduates from the BA (Hons) Architecture programme. Although the Board saw some really worthwhile design

outcomes there was a concern that the range of design projects tackled over the course were rather similar in scope and scale, thus not really challenging the most able students. There was also less evidence in the portfolios than the Board would have expected of engagement with landscape and urban design at one end of the scale and inhabitation of interior space at the other. This was despite one of the key aims of the programme being to "enable the needs of individual users and those of the wider community to be satisfied". The Board commended the "Outside Project" run for first and second year students, but felt that the learning from this, particularly working with real clients and on community issues) was not being fully exploited in later work. The Housing project in year two was also potentially really interesting, but the Board was disappointed that the work didn't appear to draw upon some of the key precedents in this area. The course team offers its encouragement to the School in its commitment to engage more thoroughly with the specific location of Belfast and the "embedding of place" in the programme. The Board would encourage a more careful and thorough investigation of the local precedents which were sited, in terms of were cited, in terms of inhabitation, urban structure, spatial qualities, materials and construction.

- *Technology & Environment*

The Board was satisfied that all Part One Validation Criteria in the area of Technology & Environment were being met by all graduates from the BA (Hons) Architecture programme. The Board felt that the fundamental requirements of this area were well-covered. The Board heard from both External Examiners and students that over the short life of the course the input

from the technology oriented staff based at the Jordanstown Campus had progressed from being essentially lecture based to an increasing involvement with studio work. The Board saw evidence of this in the integration of technology and environmental issues in the design work seen in the exhibition and the portfolios. The Board felt, however, that what they observed were often traditional textbook approaches to environmental appraisals and detailing etc., rather than technology and environmental engineering acting as drivers for design outcomes.

Overall, the Board was extremely impressed by the facilities available in the School of the Built Environment at the University's Jordanstown Campus and by the commitment and enthusiasm of the staff there contributing to the architecture programme. The Board believes that the expertise of Built Environment staff and the facilities at Jordanstown are yet to be fully exploited. The Board thus advises the staff team to look for ways in which students can be challenged and supported to make use of the specialist Built Environment facilities and thus more thoroughly embed technology and environmental agendas in design work from the outset.

- *Cultural Context*

The Board was satisfied that all the Part One Validation Criteria in the area of Cultural Context were being met by all graduates from the BA (Hons) Architecture programme. The Board found good coverage of the criteria in this area across the five Cultural Context units run across the three years of the course. The Board was interested in the course teams efforts to bring visual culture into subjects which normally result in purely

written outcomes and felt that more might be done to bring the staff responsible for the teaching in this area into direct engagement with studio work. The Board saw some excellent, well-researched and well-written dissertations in which challenging subjects were being tackled.

The Board found that historical and cultural context was generally a strength of the course with some impressive taught courses and assignment outcomes in this area. The Board did not, however, see this as thoroughly embedded in student design work as it might have expected. The Board felt that this was possibly because few of the design projects start at a sufficiently early stage in the design process to allow students to engage as thoroughly as they were clearly capable of doing with the widest range of contexts and precedents. The Board advises the course team to investigate how historical and theoretical context can be more thoroughly integrated into the design project work.

The Board also noted that a stated aim of the course related to "specificity of place", but felt that the city of Belfast and social agendas could be given more prominence in the programme, possibly backed by comparative field trips, for example to Berlin.

- *Communication Skills*

The Board was satisfied that all the Part One Validation Criteria in the area of Communication Skills were being met by all graduates from the BA (Hons) Architecture programme. The Board found the students it met to be articulate, fluent and convincing in argument. The written work seen was also of a high standard. The visual

communication seen was less convincing. The Board recognised the problems faced by the staff as a result of the first cohort of students being recruited through the Engineering Faculty on the basis of A levels alone. Despite the revised recruitment procedures with a focus on portfolios, the formal teaching and the course's base in a School of Art & Design, the Board felt that there was still insufficient evidence of the sensitive use of media and exploration of media in the work.

It was clear that model-making was one of the fundamental drivers for design thinking in the course and the Board saw lots of models. These were, however, typically to one scale and predominantly of the outside of buildings. Concept and sketch models already related to semi-resolved forms and there was less evidence of exploration than the Board would have expected. Such evidence of model-making as was included in portfolios was often badly photographed. The Board felt that students might be given better support and guidance in this area.

The Board had problems in understanding the structure and content of many of the portfolios it examined. The Board thus recommends that students are given more formal support regarding the protocols and strategies of assembling a portfolio of their work. This should focus on ensuring that the portfolio can be 'read' by an employer or Visiting Board member, but also on making sure that there is evidence of process in the form of sketch designs, good photographs of developmental models etc. The Board emphasises this latter point because of the course team's claims that a concentration on process is central to the programme's approach to design teaching

- *Management Practice & Law*

The Board was satisfied that all the Part One Validation Criteria in the area of Management Practice & Law were being met by all graduates from the BA (Hons) Architecture programme. The coverage of the criteria in this area across the whole course, but primarily through the three Professional Context modules which appeared thorough. There was a significant input to the teaching in this area by local practitioners. The group work, preparation for practice, the case study critical appraisal, the focus on commercial issues in the proposal to a developer and the development of personal skills were all handled in impressive fashion. There were also clear links between the taught activity in this area and studio activity. The Board saw good examples of health and safety analyses, costings and analyses of regulatory issues associated with design projects. Overall the Board saw clear evidence of serious engagement with professional issues and felt that this was a real strength of the programme.

- *Preparation for Professional Experience*

The three Professional Context modules included in the final semester of year two and both semesters of year 3 provided an excellent preparation for work in practice. The assignments for these modules require students to generate a CV, prepare a portfolio and give a presentation. The Professional Context III module includes a series of lectures, many given by visiting practitioners designed to help prepare students for their "year out". The recent graduates who met the Board confirmed that they felt well-prepared for practice. All of them who had made an effort to find "year-out" employment had already done so. As well as placements with local practices, some graduates

had found employment with prestigious London based practices and others were gaining experience in Europe.

12.5.4 *Progression within the course*

Recruitment to the first cohort of the programme was done through the Faculty of Engineering and was based solely on academic achievement. The stated admissions requirement was 280 UCAS points, but a number of students were recruited below this level to allow targets to be met. The progression rate for this cohort was disappointing. The first year students recruited in 2004 and 2005 came through a more rigorous process which included the requirement to submit a portfolio of work. The course team believe this sent clear signals to applicants about the importance of visual skills and assisted candidate's self-selection. The progression rates of these subsequent cohorts have certainly been better than that of the first intake.

12.5.5 *Assessment*

The Board saw a good range of assessment methods in use across the programme. In general they felt that these were being used appropriately. The Board was, however, concerned about the process via which marks were awarded for design work. Despite questioning staff on the process, the Board felt that there was a lack of clarity about the process and particularly the balance between the formative and summative elements. The Board was concerned that the process adopted could result in over-generous marking, albeit not such as to jeopardise minimum pass standards. The Board thus recommends that the staff team should look again at the assessment regime they employ for design work. The reconsideration should focus on the balance between formative and

summative assessment and particularly in ensuring that there is absolute clarity in students' minds as to the nature of the assessment at various stages in the design process and the contribution made to the final module grade. The staff team should also look to benchmark their assessment procedures, not just in design, against other validated Part One courses.

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

The University has agreed a cap on entry to the degree of 40 students during the current building work and 50 students at least for the foreseeable future. Applicants must satisfy the general University entry requirements and the minimum UCAS points requirement is currently set at 280. Applicants who look as though they will satisfy the entry requirements are asked to submit a portfolio of work demonstrating "a balanced range of skills and interests".

In line with the University's philosophy, the architecture degree aims to form a component of a ladder of opportunity for students seeking careers in the built environment and design areas. Students on the course who find the course unsuitable may transfer to the architectural technology degree or to other design courses. Students from architectural technology may transfer into architecture; their suitability and level of entry being determined by portfolio examination, with a final decision being taken by the course committee. In all cases a key requirement would be the requirement that students met all the RIBA/ARB Validation Criteria before graduation. The course regulations allow the transfer of students from other validated architecture degrees providing they have satisfied appropriate core requirements.

The Board commended the commitment demonstrated by both the University and the course team in recruiting mature students and students from non-traditional backgrounds and hopes that this commitment will remain as the course increases in popularity and applications from conventionally qualified students increase.

12.6 **External examining arrangements**

The School had appointed two experienced External Examiners, one from practice and one from an academic background. The Board found the External Examiners reports produced to be excellent, full, detailed and unusually informative. The Board was able to meet one of the External Examiners face-to-face and had a telephone conversation with the other. The External Examiners were both very supportive of the School. They were impressed with the achievements of the course team in developing the programme from scratch in three years and confirmed that in their view the course was beginning to develop its own distinctive character. They also confirmed that they had full confidence in the assessment procedures within the programme and the standards set. All the graduating students had been interviewed by one or other of the External Examiners. They confirmed that they did see actions in response to issues raised and that the External Examiners have been regularly consulted by members of the course team on matters relating to course development.

The key concerns raised by the External Examiners in their reports and discussions with the Board were:

- Environmental and sustainability issues are addressed but typically at the end of projects; these issues need

to be addressed earlier to allow them to inform design outcomes.

- Although formal drawing classes have been introduced, the less able students need more remedial support to strengthen their visual communication skills.
- It was not yet clear how the course team will develop a research agenda which allows effective links to the teaching of the Part One and the proposed Part two courses.
- Despite the emphasis in the course on process it was often difficult to find this in the work presented by students which was often difficult to "navigate".

12.7 **Arrangements for Monitoring Professional Experience**

The course's first Part One graduates had just been confirmed at the time of the Board's visit. In preparation for this, a Professional Studies Advisor had been appointed. A placement module for graduates had also been validated at Faculty level using the University's procedures for short course validation. The module had been based on the University's Good Practice Guide for Work Experience together with the RIBA and ARB guidance on stage one professional experience requirements. In addition to the attendance and distance learning elements of the module arrangements for visiting and monitoring students and signing PEDR record sheets were being developed. Although the placement module had yet to be delivered the Board was confident that the course team had in place appropriate systems for supporting and monitoring graduates whilst undertaking their professional experience.

12.8 **Students**

The Board had a lively and informed meeting with 23 students drawn from all three years of the BA programme. An additional six students joined the meeting in its final minutes. The Board thought that this was a commendable turnout given that the visit was taking place outside term time. The Board also found the Critical Self Appraisal that it had received in advance from the students really helpful and appreciated the effort that had gone into assembling this in a systematic and easily readable format. In both their appraisal and the meeting, students were very positive about their experience of the course and the staff team, commending in particular:

- the course's location in the School of Art & Design in the centre of the city.
- the close links with the other disciplines in Art & Design;
- the support provided from the School of the Built Environment at Jordanstown and the links between these staff and the staff based at Belfast which have improved substantially over the lifetime of the course;
- the benefits of being taught by staff from two 5 rated research departments in terms of staff knowledge, contacts and resources;
- the supportive and easily-accessible staff;
- the lively studio culture in which students support one another and interact across the years of the course
- the excellent wood- and metal-working workshop and the materials made available free through the resource centre;
- the computing facilities and the software available both of which had been upgraded recently
- the support provided by staff for students to take on the running of the printing/plotting facility;

- the interesting field trips organised and the subsidy provided to allow all students to attend;
- the focus on the social and cultural dimensions of architecture, although students felt these had really only been fully realised in the final year of the programme;

The Board encouraged the students to identify weaknesses in the degree and its delivery. The only issues raised were:

- the problems associated with the major redevelopment of the site, although staff had worked hard to maximise the learning that could be achieved through close proximity to such work;
- the poor quality studio spaces, although it is recognised that this issue will be resolved when the course moves into its new accommodation in 2007;
- the closure of the building at 2200 hours.

The student:staff ratio at the time of the Board's visit was 16.8:1. Two additional new appointments are being made with the staff due to start work in September 2006.

12.9 **Staff:**

At the time of the visit, the staff complement delivering the BA (Hons) Architecture programme consisted of:
 5.05 full-time equivalent (fte) staff contributing 0.3 or more to the programme
 0.8 fte contribution from staff in the two Faculties responsible for the programme with fractional contributions less than 0.3
 1.2 fte contribution from part-time staff
 31 Visiting Lecturers on hourly contracts.

The course had also recently acquired a full-time administrator to replace the temporary support previously made available by the School.

The Board had a helpful and open discussion with 16 members of the staff team. Both full-time and part-time staff present. The Board was also pleased that seven of those present were from the School of the Built Environment. Despite the fact that the staff were drawn from two Faculties and a substantial proportion were part-timers, the Board found a commendable cohesion and a clear shared vision for the future of architectural education at Ulster University. The Board was particularly pleased to find research active staff from the School of the Built Environment enthusiastic about their involvement with the programme really committed to developing a teaching approach appropriate to architecture students.

The Board was impressed with:

- the range of academic expertise which the staff team brought to their delivery of the programme;
- the diverse backgrounds and experience of staff members
- the substantial contribution from local practitioners.

12.10 **Research:**

The two parent schools of the architecture course, Art & Design and the Built Environment, both achieved grade 5 in the last Research Assessment Exercise. The new course is thus based in an environment with a strong research track record. Whilst this is a real strength it also represents a real challenge to the architecture staff team who are clearly being expected to develop a research base which is ultimately on a par with that of the two host departments.

It was clear to the Board that there exists within the staff team strong research potential; some £300k had already been secured to support a range of research projects. The Board also had the opportunity to see a range of research publications already generated. The Board encourages the staff team in their commitment to developing the strongest possible links between their developing research activities and their teaching. The Board supports the statement made by the Vice Chancellor to the Board that the University valued, not just RAE oriented research, but also activities supported by "third-stream" funding. The Board advises the staff team to explore these possibilities particularly given the scope for work with development agencies in Belfast and the province.

12.11 **Equal Opportunities**

The first students to join in September 2003 were recruited to the architecture programme by the Faculty of Engineering; 26% of this cohort was female. The two cohorts recruited following the physical move to the School of Art & Design have seen a significant increase in the percentage of female students. This is now in line with the national average (38% female). The course has a real commitment to recruiting mature students from non A level backgrounds; seven out of the 23 students who attended the meeting with the Board had joined the course with BTEC/HNC/HND or other technically oriented qualifications. The Board hoped that this commitment to a diverse student population could be maintained even when the course attracts an increasing number of traditionally qualified UCAS applicants.

The team teaching on the programme come from a commendably diverse range of national, academic and

practice backgrounds. In their Critical Self-Appraisal, the student commented that having lecturers and tutors from different parts of the globe had widened their perspective on the architecture of different cultures. The Board learned that Northern Ireland has the most stringent equal opportunities legislation and monitoring arrangements in the UK. Ulster University has strict guidelines and rigorous procedures to ensure the impartial selection of new staff.

12.12 **Resourcing and Facilities:**

- General

The new architecture programme is based within the School of Art & Design at the University of Ulster's city-centre Belfast Campus, although students also have access to the facilities of the School of the Built Environment based at the University's Jordanstown campus some seven miles to the north of the city. The University's Belfast campus is currently undergoing a major remodelling. The construction work has resulted in considerable disruption for staff and students. Staff have, however, attempted to use this to advantage seeking to ensure that being located adjacent to a building site becomes an integrated part of the student's learning experience. Regular presentations have been organised from member of the design and construction team and from the University's estates team.

The University has demonstrated a real commitment to supporting the development of the discipline dedicating £25k per annum to specifically support the infrastructure and IT facilities for the new course. This was in addition to the normal "per capita" funding through the School.

When building work is complete, the architecture programme will be located on levels E and F of the refurbished building designed to provide studio space sufficient to give all students a personal space and allowing for the development of a Part Two programme.

- *Studios*

The Board was unable to see the spaces which had been used as studios as these had been handed over to the construction process immediately following the end of term. Students confirmed that the studios had been sufficient to allow everyone a space to work in and that a good studio culture had developed. The course would be operating in temporary spaces for the 2006/7 academic year before moving into their permanent home ready for the 2007/8 academic year. The Board saw the plans of these spaces and had the opportunity to view refurbished studio space similar to that which the architecture course would inhabit. The Board was impressed by those elements of the refurbished building that were visited and noted that the spaces being allocated to architecture demonstrated a commitment to maintaining a genuine studio culture within the programme.

- *IT*

Architecture students have access to a dedicated computer suite with 16 high specification PCs and 12 MACs. CAD teaching centres on the use of Vectorworks and practising architects are brought in to teach this. Other software available includes ArchiCAD, AutoCAD, 3DVis, plus Photoshop and SketchUp. The School also has a large IT lab equipped with 32 high specification MACs; this is primarily a teaching resource, but is open to all students in the School including architecture students outside the

timetabled slots. There had been problems in making an appropriate printing service available, but this has been resolved by the students taking on the responsibility of managing the print and plotting facility. Students confirmed that they had raised concerns about the adequacy of computing facilities in earlier years, but that these had been addressed and that the current level of resource was adequate for the current student numbers.

- *Workshops*

The School of Art & Design at the Belfast city campus has excellent workshop facilities to support the architecture programme. The main facility used by architecture students is an excellent large well-equipped timber and metal workshop, but they also have access to specialist workshops for ceramics and jewellery plus a sculpture studio. Students confirmed that they were well-supported in using the main workshop with good training and helpful technicians.

- *Laboratories*

The School of the Built Environment, based at the Jordanstown campus has an impressive range of specialist laboratories as would be expected given the School's RAE5 rating. The facilities include an anechoic chamber, environmental comfort laboratory, fire-testing rigs, solar rigs, extensive materials and soils testing rigs. Architecture students experience these facilities via timetabled laboratory sessions primarily in year one of the course. The Board felt that students might be encouraged to make use of the excellent facilities in connection with final year design projects where sound and or lighting studies and/or experimentation with materials might well be

appropriate. Revised module and design briefs might be designed to facilitate this.

- *Specialist Facilities*

The School of Art & Design also has facilities for traditional and digital photography, video-editing suites and a printmaking workshop.

- *Library*

The main architecture book and journal collection is housed in the University's Belfast campus library. This is located in a building linked to the main building housing the studios by a bridge. The library has been rapidly building its stock of books and journals since the launch of the programme in 2003. A special allocation of £23k has been made available to enhance the architecture provision. The Board understood that additional funding (over and above that allocated on the basis of student numbers) would continue to be made available in support of the future development of Part Two and Part Three provision. The Belfast Library now holds approximately 2200 books on architecture. Students also have access to a wide range of texts on architectural technology, engineering and management issues from the Jordanstown Campus library. These can be delivered to the Belfast library within 24 hours of a request being made. The Belfast Library has subscriptions to 21 architecture journals plus many other relevant art and design publications. The Jordanstown Library takes an extensive range of journals in areas such as environmental engineering, materials, technology and urban design. Many are available in e-journal form and students have access to these from the studios and off-campus through the "Athens" system.

The Belfast library currently operates in rather cramped accommodation, but provides study places for 57 readers, 12 with networked computers. The Board heard from the campus librarian and the specialist subject librarian that there were plans to develop an enhanced Learning Resources Centre as a key component of the campus refurbishment. Students confirmed that the library provision was good and that they were well supported by the staff in the form of induction and specialist skills training.

13. Attachments

13.1 Prior to the visit, the Board was provided with the following documentation:

- Critical Self Appraisal including SWOT analysis
- Questionnaire including:
 - course structure details
 - mapping of course against RIBA/ARB Criteria
 - details of External Examiners' roles
 - admissions policies
 - student statistics
 - staff resources
 - equal opportunities issues
- External Examiners and Advisory Panel's CVs
- External Examiners' and Advisory Panel's Reports
- Response to External Examiners' Reports
- Supplementary Information including:
 - course information
 - details of awards

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- teaching and learning approaches
 - assessment strategies
 - professional experience arrangements
 - School context
 - research activities
 - staff development strategy
 - summary of quality assurance procedures
 - accommodation details
 - Belfast campus Learning Resource Centre
 - Jordanstown campus Learning Resource Centre
 - IT provision
 - Financial resources
 - Engagement with the profession
- Module Descriptions Document
 - Year One Project Design Briefs
 - Year Two Project Design Briefs
 - Year Three Project Design Briefs
 - 2005/6 Dissertation Titles
 - Placement Module
 - University of Ulster Institutional Audit April 2005
 - Annual Subject Monitoring Documents 2005-2006 including:
 - BA (Hons) Architecture Programme Report
 - Subject Report - Art & Design
 - Faculty Conclusions regarding architecture
 - Faculty Evaluation & Recommendations based on a
 - Review by a Sub-Group of new courses and courses in transition (including architecture)
 - Report of Teaching & Learning Annual Subject Monitoring Sub Group
 - External Examiners' Handbook
 - Extract from the Minutes of VCAG (RP) Meeting
 - Campus Development Plan
- Details of Library Opening Hours
- 13.2 The Board was provided with the following additional information in the base room:
- Ulster University undergraduate prospectus
 - Ulster university postgraduate prospectus
 - Design courses leaflet
 - Application for ARB Prescription - explanations requested and responses provided
 - Full internal validation documents for the BA (Hons) Architecture programme
 - Staff CVs
 - Theme Reports December 2005
 - "Professional Practice Award (post RIBA Part One) - short course document validated at Faculty level
 - Academic year timetables
 - Course Handbook 2005/6
 - Level 1 Handbook 2005/6
 - Level 2 Handbook 2005/6
 - Level 3 Handbook 2005/6
- 13.3 Board members also had access to a networked PC allowing access to a range of additional course and University and School documentation including
- An interactive version of the mapping of the course onto the RIBA/ARB Validation Criteria.
 - www.fourdaysontheoutside.com - a dedicated website for the group project tackled by first and second year students in February.