

**School of Architecture & Design
University of Ulster
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Confirmed by the RIBA Education Committee, 17 September 2008

**Report of the Exploratory Board to the Master of Architecture (M.Arch)
Proposed Candidate Course for Part Two exemption. 10 March 2008**

The Board members were as follows:

Dr Robert Felix – Chair
Mr Richard Patterson
Ms Elantha Evans

Stephanie Beasley-Suffolk (RIBA) attended as Secretary.

David Gloster, RIBA Director of Education, attended the visit as an observer

1. Recommendations

At its meeting on 17 September 2008 the Education Committee of the RIBA
Confirmed:

**Candidate Course Status for Exemption from Part Two of the RIBA
Examinations for the Master of Architecture (M.Arch).**

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

2. Background

The BA Hons Architecture programme at the University of Ulster was validated for Part One exemption in summer 2006. The School has now established the Master of Architecture course as the next phase of its aim to offer a complete suite of validated professional courses. The first students (22) were enrolled in September 2007 and should graduate in summer 2009. There will also be non-professional route (to start in September 2009) which will not carry Part Two exemption.

The programme has been internally validated by the University of Ulster and the purpose of the Exploratory Board was to consider the programme for Candidate Course status with a view to obtaining full validation when the first cohort graduates.

Representatives of the School attended the meeting of the NCCCG on 14 November 2007 to discuss the programme. The Group agreed that it would be appropriate to convene an Exploratory Board to consider the programme for Candidate Course status.

The following are the main points of the discussion, which were fed back to the School by letter (26 November 2007) and were accurate as of that date:

- The Group was concerned about the structure of the second semester of the second year. This includes the 30-credit Design Studio IV and the 20-credit Thesis. The Group was concerned that this would place too great a load on students at the end of the M.Arch. The School explained that preparation for these modules would start in semester 1 (Thesis Preparation with Colloquium module, 10 credits) and that they had also anticipated that there would be close linkages between the dissertation and the design. Nonetheless, the Group was still concerned that the burden of delivering two M level pieces of work at the same time was too great.
- The Group advised the School that the language in the documentation needs tightening. There was a lack of clarity about what would be required for the thesis and descriptions of the same modules were sometimes subtly different. Module descriptors should also be linked more closely to the criteria to give students the opportunity to meet the criteria through the design modules.
- The Design Studio IV (ARC740B2) module descriptor should refer specifically to the integrated building design.

Post meeting note: The RIBA was later (August 2008) referred to specific parts of the programme documentation in which this was addressed.

- The Group learned that condonement was not permitted at any point in the course, although there was reference to it in the course documentation.
- The Group thought that this might be confusing and that this should be made more explicit.
- The Group recommended that the number of learning outcomes could be reduced and explicitly linked to the criteria. As currently expressed they are too open ended and would make it difficult for students to demonstrate they are meeting the criteria and would also make assessment difficult. It might also be helpful to indicate in the documentation where the intended outcomes are taught and where they will be assessed.

3. Commentary

The Board wishes to thank the staff and students for their hospitality and openness during the visit. Overall, the Board concluded that the School had done extremely well and thanks them for their hard work. The Board wishes in particular to compliment the students, who have a clear grasp of what they understand to be the nature and philosophy of the course. The Board also commends the evident staff support for the students and the thoughtful and considered answers providing during the meetings.

Given the comments that were made by the NCCCG in November 2007, the Board was disappointed that this had not been addressed effectively. Several significant issues remain to be resolved and the Board offers the School the following comments and advice which it hopes will be taken

3.1 The Board understood from discussion with staff and students that the programme is about synthesis, co-ordination and adaptability. This was expressed particularly well by the students, who were forthright and open and clearly understood the ethos and nature of the programme, in concert with the staff. The work is good and the students are lively and engaged. The School is actively involved with its community and the local profession and the programme has the potential to prepare students well for practice in Northern Ireland. However, the Board found the documentation confusing, too long and not adequately representative of true nature

and content of the programme and would benefit from editing, as demonstrated in the following observations. The Board believed that the School has sought to predict the requirements of various professional groups and that this has been expressed as anxiety about criteria compliance. There is an apparent occasional mismatch between what is stated in the documents and the evidence in the students' work. The Board considered that the documentation was not yet balanced, requiring greater specificity in some areas and less in others.

3.2 The Board concurs with and reiterates the NCCCG's comments regarding learning outcomes. The Board considered that the present wording of the learning outcomes is not helpful to students. Module descriptors and coding do not appear to correlate. The way the learning outcomes are framed does not always explicitly represent objectives and they are not assessable.

The connection between text, evidence and meeting the criteria is hard to determine. The Board believes that learning outcomes could be written in a condensed and accurate way and then mapped against the criteria. The Board found that there is too much repetition and over adherence to the wording of the criteria.

3.3 The Board concurs and reiterates the NCCCG's comments regarding workload, believing this is still an issue. Moreover, the Board considered that students had little time in which to deliver the final design project. At present 7 or 8 weeks are allowed for building, followed by 7 weeks for completion. The Board considered that in reality probably only five weeks were truly available. The School believes that as the two final design modules as well as the thesis are linked across the whole year that both the workload and output are suitable at masters level and are balanced in terms of expectations and output. The Board understands that the School's rationale is not to overload the students. The School reported that the interrelationship between design projects and thesis across the 2 semesters was discussed and planned in relation to the evidence of other Part II courses. The sequential process, which was also discussed with the advisory panel, is intended to allow continuity, linkages and interrelationships between modules and the thesis in the studio. The School hopes that such linkage would allow the students to build up their work in gradual stages. These intentions notwithstanding, the Board's concern about possible student overload remains.

3.4 The Board had reservations about the order of projects in the programme as presently constructed. The Board advises the School to consider the pattern of projects to show the scale and building typology of each project demonstrating a progression from Year 5 (M.Arch 1) to Year 6 (M.Arch 2).

3.5 The Board noted that staff involvement in assessment will be thorough. Although the Board received helpful the supplementary information about assessment and course content by staff, this was not outlined in the documents.

3.6 There is not as much reference to structure and construction in the documentation as might be expected. This omission should be rectified. Post-visit, the Board learned that a section on technology would be included in the document to provide overview.

3.7 At present students' work does not provide evidence for all areas which should be covered by the programme. The Board advises the School evidence

for all areas must be provided for an Initial Visiting Board when this takes place (for example, evidence of the design process).

- 3.8 The Board considered that there was room for improvement of representation of design ideas, concepts or objectives. The Board considered that presentation skills could be significantly improved.
- 3.9 Integration of design/cultural context and technology is still an issue.

4. Course details

4.1 *Structure and content*

The M.Arch programme is a year-based programme within a modular framework. The School is keen to engage with and understand its community. The rapidly changing context at socio-political level and cross-border issues directly influence the modules on offer. Even with the new buoyancy, optimism and opportunity in Northern Ireland, the School is aware that it still offers a relatively limited breadth of experience. Many students have worked exclusively in Northern Ireland. The School is therefore proactively outward looking, running joint studios with students from Harvard.

Each semester comprises a mixture of compulsory and elective modules, except the final semester of M.Arch 2 in which all modules are compulsory. There is double-mapping of compulsory and elective elements against the RIBA/ARB criteria. Students must pass the criteria, therefore the combination of electives taken is immaterial given that all are designed to provide the opportunity to meet the criteria. It should not be possible to progress through the course or to graduate without having met the criteria. The Board would like reassurance that the mechanism, while allowing the School to deliver the programme as it wishes, is fair to students. (See item 3.3 & 3.4 above).

Group work is a major feature of the programme, normally in groups of 5. Students undertake individual projects in a collaborative framework, with group proposals also generate individual responses. The School needs to make entirely transparent how they assess individual contribution to group work and in what ways they assess students' individual work. The School later notified the RIBA that it follows University procedures for assessment of group/individual work contributions as set out in the University Assessment handbook.

The programme fits within the University's masters programmes structure as an enhanced undergraduate masters. Under University regulations, all masters (of whatever type) must include a dissertation, length of which varies according to subject area and the type of masters. For a taught masters in an Art subject, students must produce a dissertation of up to 15,000 words or equivalent work, such as an artefact. The Board was concerned that this was an exceptional length for an undergraduate masters dissertation. The present Board concurs with and reiterates the NCCCG's concern that the second semester of the final year may place too great a load on students, notwithstanding the planned links between dissertation and design and the intention that preparation begins in Semester 1. Written work will be submitted in semester 2 week 8, giving the School eight weeks in which to

grade it. The Board was concerned that, in practice, students may not have sufficient time in which to complete.

4.2 *Criteria compliance*

Although consideration of criteria compliance cannot be established until a full Visiting Board views the work of the graduating cohort, the Exploratory Board wishes to offer comment on two specific areas to which it believes more consideration might be given.

4.2.1 *Technology and Environment*

The Board wished to explore the coverage of construction and structure within the course. From the documentation it appeared that modules were concerned with sustainability and urban frameworks. The School replied that construction and structure is project based, structured into design briefs and covered in studio and presentation of case studies by engineering (Multidisciplinary) firms. This is developed specifically for MArch as the students have experience of how the profession approaches technology/etc by team consultations etc.

Web-based material is becoming more popular with students. The School would like to make this aspect of the programme interdisciplinary via webCT. The School is also involved in establishing CABE in Northern Ireland and has been encouraged by the response of architects. While noting this, the Board observed that There is little reference to structure and construction in the documentation. This omission should be rectified. The module description may reflect this innovative method of delivery.

4.2.2 *Management, Practice and law*

The School's stated intention is to promote the link between teaching and practice at M.Arch level through linking real projects to design studio, as has been the case at BA level. However, the Board found that. Management, Practice and Law does not appear to be part of the studio culture. The Board advises the school to consider this and how it can be integrated.

As far as professional experience is concerned, many students may take the Ulster Professional Experience Certificate not Ulster between the Part One and M.Arch. The aim of this is to shape and challenge the notion of being divorced from education in the year out, providing key learning experience and preparation for the M.Arch through peer learning. It also helps students decide whether they are receiving appropriate experience and to change practice if necessary.

5. Assessment

The School has appointed an experienced external examiner and intends ultimately to appoint two.

The pass mark is 50. All staff take part in reviews. Year leaders are involved in all areas of assessment to provide an overview. Staff complete a feedback sheet which lists aims and objectives. Checklists are used even at interim stages ensuring that at the summative stage everything can be tracked. This is intended to be a safety net to ensure that the point at which the students have passed the criteria in the School's opinion can be identified and tracked. This process is explained to students at the beginning of the year. Students are made aware at the interim review whether or not

they are on track to meet the criteria. The whole piece of work is assessed at portfolio review. The undergraduate course operates a similar system. Students must pass both module and the key skills within the module. It is possible for students to pass a module but fail key skills; however, the student will fail overall if they pass the module but fail the key skills. Everything is marked and tracked and students can identify where they have failed to meet the criteria. This contradict previous section on assessment of criteria

Much of the work is group-based; the School confirmed that mechanisms are in place to identify individual students' work, which it is assessed individually and that criteria have been met. Attitude will also be assessed, reviewing the students as they progress from directed input to self-motivation and assessing how initiative and contributions to studio discussions. Assessment would be descriptive and would not contribute to or carry formal credits. This is to be considered in relation to team working and to encourage development in skills and overall contribution

Reference to condonement remained in the documentation at the time of the visit, which had already been issued to students. The School is aware of this and assured the Board that in the case of M.Arch students, condonement is not permitted. The Board understood that reference to condonement in modules applies to students from other programmes taking the module, who are permitted to compensate. However, the Board insists that this be removed from the documentation as soon as possible for the removal of doubt.

6. Admissions

To be eligible for admission, students must have obtained a validated Part One at least 2.2. level or equivalent. Applicants must also have completed and signed off (not signed off necessarily) a year in practice. The present intake obtained Part 1 both at Ulster and at other schools. There are many applicants from the Republic of Ireland. Direct entry to the second year of the M.Arch is not permitted. The latest students may be admitted is the second semester of the first year according to the University's APEL procedures. IELTS support is available for international students.

The School is keen to attract a pool of students who have received good experiences in their year out. There is a limited range of practice in Northern Ireland and it has been difficult to get them back into a challenging environment. The School is confident that as students' year out ambitions expand, the wider experience they will bring will influence and enhance the level of achievement at Part Two.

7. Student meeting

The Board enjoyed the meeting with students, whom they found to be articulate, lively, engaged and enthusiastic. At the time of the visit, 22 students were enrolled. The students were enthusiastic about the programme and appreciative of the support provided by the staff. Among the main points of discussion were the following:

- Students noted that it could be difficult to get back into academia again after the year out, but that this was eased by the structure of the course, particularly the initial group work, which allowed them to settle back in. This allowed group momentum to be developed before having to embark on individual projects.
- Staff were approachable and available. Even outside scheduled tutorial times, it was always possible to talk to a staff member in the studio. The length of meeting with tutors entirely depended on what was being discussed.

- Students enjoyed the freedom afforded by the briefs, which made the experience different and challenging at the same time. Students are encouraged to explore ideas and approaches if they can justify their decisions. Although elements are compulsory, projects were in essence organic, affording freedom and flexibility for negotiation.
- They considered that they receive appropriate guidance, particularly appreciating the opportunity to meet and discuss live projects with individuals and authorities engaged in the projects. Particular mention was made of the Derry projects and the chance to discuss this with architects and agencies.
- Students had particularly enjoyed the trip to Boston (part-funded by the university) in which they had considered social housing schemes, which provided useful direction for the semester 2 projects. They enjoyed the opportunity to meet students from Harvard, who will make their own trip to Northern Ireland for a project based on the Border.
- Students are keen to take advantage of the new mood and opportunities in Northern Ireland help to shape the future.

Staff are pleased with the maturity developing in the student body, finding that students have investigative minds and are responding to the challenge to integrate what their thoughts and ideas with work. The Board was impressed with the clarity and articulacy with which the students spoke about their work. They clearly understand the aims and ethos of the course and produce a great deal of work, some of which is outstanding.

8. Staffing

At the time of the visit the SSR stood at 1:14, with two further staff appointments to be made. The University will continue to review staffing across the Architecture provision as the Master's programme expands. Architecture also benefits from staff from the School of the Built Environment. Visiting Lecturers and part-time tutors from private practice also make a significant contribution.

Students will be assigned an individual tutor for thesis work. In the sixth year, students will be grouped in clusters of four or five, with two tutors attached to each cluster. Tutors will come from across the school and a range of disciplines. The School recognises that students learn a great deal from one another through taking part in studio discussions and wishes to develop a process by which students help those of lower ability. This has been practised successfully in the BA degree.

The University has clear policies for staff development. All staff undergo a series of inductions (including induction for Design tutors) and also take the Postgraduate Certificate for Higher Education. There is a Visiting Professor of Design position.

9. Research

The Faculty has a strong track record in research, both Art and Design and Built Environment having achieved a 5 rating in the last Research Assessment Exercise. It houses Research Institutes for Art and Design and Built Environment and a Research Graduate School. The benefits of the Faculty's research activities are to be found not only in the expertise within the School, but also the excellent facilities. Links with research are already established in the second year of the BA, in which students undertake a project paralleled with a research project. The School intends to expand this through the M.Arch programme. One of the aims of the Thesis colloquium is to encourage M.Arch students to consider embarking on research.

10. Resources

Physical resources have been undergoing extensive refurbishment and development for the last few years. RIBA Exploratory Boards and Visiting Boards have watched this develop over the last three years. This project is now approaching completion. The building is accessible 24 hours a day except at weekends. Students benefit from the specialist facilities of the School of Art and Design in Belfast and the School of the Built Environment in Jordanstown. These are described in detail in the Part One Visiting Board report of 2006.

- *Studios*

Studio space has benefited from the ongoing refurbishment exercise. There is currently a dedicated MArch studio with computers. The provision will be doubled in the next year to include additional crit space and storage and to allow the two years of the course to engage with each other and that of the rest of the school.

- *Library*

One particularly significant planned change was the relocation of the Library to the main, refurbished building. At the time of the visit, this move was imminent. The new location is adjacent to the IT resource room and group study rooms and would bring the Library to the centre of School activity. As reported in previous visits, the Library provides an excellent resource and received additional funding to develop the Architecture collection when the BA was developed several years ago. Liaison between the Library and School is chiefly provided by the Sub-Librarian for Arts, who meets the Head of School on an annual basis, allowing her to plan the budget accordingly. Additional money has been allocated this year for book material and new journals. The architecture librarian attends all school course committees and organises regular events with the staff to review the architecture catalogue, orders.

In addition to normal new user inductions, the Library offers tailored inductions for specific projects and generic skills, often provided by researchers. These can be adapted to all levels, starting at year 1 of BA degrees and building up incrementally.

Architecture dissertations will be held in the Library and added to the catalogue.

- *Workshops*

Model making is a significant part of the course and students are well catered for. Architecture students are the heaviest users of the metal and woodworking workshops in the older linked building. Provision is rapidly developing, one major change since 2006 being the introduction of rapid prototyping. All students receive an induction enabling them to use specific machines. Qualified workshop technicians are able to use more complex ones.

- *IT*

Extensive and growing IT facilities are provided in the building, including a dedicated Mac lab and film and digital editing suite. The MacLab, containing 65 Macs, is provided by Central Services and available to all students. Another suite provides 72 PCs and 15 Macs. Design and architecture software are provided, including Archicad, Vectorworks, Rhino, Autocad, 3d Viz and Adobe design programmes. The entire building is wireless. Students may log on with their own laptops, but must have their own copies of some of the software. There is a plotter at the end of the Part One studio and a second plotter in the MArch studio. The relocation of the Library will provide an

interface with IT provision. The School also plans to embed a computer suite in the studio.

11. Future action

Once the University gains Candidate Status, it is anticipated that the School will invite the RIBA to undertake an Initial Visiting Board in summer 2009 or shortly thereafter in order to consider the programme for full validation.

12. Documentation

Prior to the visit the School supplied:

- Master of Architecture Validated Course documentation
- Letter from Head of School (14 January 2008) responding to NCCCG's comments of 14 November 2007.