

Report of the RIBA exploratory board to Bath Spa University

Date of visiting board: 27 & 28 February 2025
Confirmed by the RIBA: 28 April 2025

1. Details of institution hosting course

Bath Spa University
Locksbrook Campus
Locksbrook Road
Bath BA1 3EL

2. Head of School of Design

Dr Kristin Doern

Subject Leader – Architecture

Ian Parkes

Programme Leader – Architecture

Toby Smith

3. Course offered for candidate course status

BA (Hons) Architecture – 3 years
BA (Hons) Architecture with Integrated Foundation Year – 4 years
BA (Hons) Architecture with Professional Placement Year – 4 years

4. Awarding body

Bath Spa University

5. The visiting board

Albena Atanassova (Chair)
Professor Lorraine Farrelly (Vice Chair)
Jane McAllister

In attendance: Stephanie Beasley-Suffolk, Validation Manager

6. Procedures and criteria for the visit

The Exploratory Board operated under the RIBA Procedures for Validation 2021 (implemented 2022).

7. Recommendation of the Exploratory Board

On 28 April 2025 the RIBA confirmed that Candidate Course Status for Part 1 be awarded to the following programmes:

BA (Hons) Architecture – 3 years
BA (Hons) Architecture with Integrated Foundation Year – 4 years
BA (Hons) Architecture with Professional Placement Year – 4 years

The designation ‘Candidate Course for Validation’ implies that the course has been judged to have the potential to meet RIBA themes and values and graduate attributes, if implemented as anticipated. It is not, however, equivalent to recognition, which can only be granted once the standard of work produced by graduating students has been assessed and found satisfactory.

A full visiting board to consider the programme for RIBA Part 1 validation will take place at a date to be agreed between the RIBA and the School.

8. Standard requirements for validation

Continued RIBA recognition of all courses and qualifications is dependent upon:

- i external examiners being appointed for the course
- ii any significant changes to the courses and qualifications being submitted to the RIBA
- iii any change of award title, and the effective date of the change, being notified to the RIBA so that its recognition may formally be transferred to the new title
- iv submission to the RIBA of the names of students passing the courses and qualifications listed
- v in the UK, standard requirements of validation include the completion by the institution of the annual statistical return issued by the RIBA Education Department

9. Academic position statement (written by the school) – to be imported later

The BSU Locksbrook Campus places the Architecture programme at the heart of a UNESCO World Heritage Site, significant for the relationship between its built and natural context, of change and reinvention, and of material and social cultures. The city offers a unique backdrop for students to study creative, contextual, and collaborative approaches to architectural design. The Locksbrook building itself is a case study in the creative reuse of existing buildings, providing students with a template for how to design as flexible, human-centred, and environmentally responsive practitioners.

The Architecture programme has been designed to support our institutional identity of 'Professional Creativity', and to develop students who exemplify our values of curiosity, creativity, and confidence. We build our learning around the key knowledge, skills, and behaviours needed for our students to make a positive impact on the profession, on the design and construction industries, and in society.

The core values of our programme promote an architecture for people and planet. A climate-positive approach shapes design for an equitable and sustainable future. Individual agency here is limited, but our ability to act on it is enhanced through collaborative practice and a clear understanding of our professional context. Our approach to developing this form of ethical practice is underpinned by an understanding of architecture as a craft, where our practice is honed over time through iterative design and material experimentation.

Design Studio projects make up 56% of our Architecture programme, with design thinking and practice used to explore all modules. Students at Levels 4 and 5 share our main studio, benefiting from vertical teaching and peer assisted learning. Level 6 students have their own studio in which to hone their professional identities.

Our Locksbrook campus hosts substantial technical workshops and open studios from across the School of Design and the School of Art, Film and Media, employing diverse creative practices and means of exploring form and materiality by 'learning through doing'. We prioritise process over product, encouraging our students to develop their personal iterative design practices over a focus on final design outputs. Material values and cultures are explored

through model making and creative expression through experimental studio and workshop practices.

An awareness of the impact of design decisions on environmental performance is at the heart of our design process, recognising the need to shift industry focus towards the reuse and upgrade of existing buildings, and where new construction will need to meet the highest performance standards. Students are introduced to Passivhaus principles at Level 4 through the Coaction 'Design Performance for Climate Action' programme, and academic staff accredited in Passivhaus and retrofit design support the development of this learning through Design Studio and Architectural Technologies modules as they progress.

Good design comes from 'designing with' as opposed to 'designing for', and our focus on collaborative practice, interdisciplinary learning, and live projects underpins this approach. Students are invited to work with representatives from design, construction, user, and social groups from the outset, letting them situate their practice within a wider community of designers, and explore the agendas feeding into architectural design. Live project working and integrating learning around professional behaviours in both subject-based and design modules foreground the importance of understanding diversity in agenda, and the communication and critical thinking skills needed to integrate these perspectives in a coherent design. All design projects have local, accessible sites, emphasising the importance of contextual responses built around lived experience.

All students are offered the option of a year in industry between Levels 5 and 6 to explore their learning in practice, honing their design process through real project work and improving their understanding of creative and construction industries. Our pedagogy is focussed on a student-centred approach to learning. Health and wellbeing, of our students, of their clients for whom they design, and of those using the spaces they design, is integral to our teaching practice. Our academic staff are reflective, evidence-based practitioners whose teaching and feedback practices embrace a critical approach to traditional architectural pedagogies. Workload, pacing, and assessment formats are all planned to support student engagement, including those with specific learning differences, and to design out unhealthy and excluding practices. Students build long-term relationships with individual Academic Advisors who follow them through their time at university, offering pastoral support and assistance for students to take ownership of their learning and professional journeys.

As a new subject for BSU, we have yet to run programmes beyond Level 6. Our intention is to establish a full suite of Architecture programmes covering RIBA Parts 1, 2, and 3 to allow our students to progress into the profession. We also intend to develop further unaccredited programmes at Level 7, building on existing provision within the School of Design to offer students routes toward specialist roles in the broader design and construction industries, and a project office to enhance students' access to practice-based learning.

10. Commendations

The Board made the following commendations.

- 10. The Board commends the collaborative sense of community within the School and the culture of embedding contemporary issues within the broad architectural curriculum.
- 10.2 The Board praises the architecture staff for establishing strong connections with the profession, especially through Architecture Practice 1 and 2, which provide students with opportunities to visit practices and engage with employers in small, medium, and large practice settings, preparing them for future professional practice and employment.
- 10.3 The Board commends the School in providing a unique learning environment at Locksbrook campus with a range of specialist resources, workshops and associated studio space.

11. Action points

The visiting board proposes the following action points. The RIBA expects the university to report on how it will address these action points. Failure by the university to satisfactorily resolve action points may result in a course being conditioned by a future visiting board.

- 11.1 The current alignment of modules with the design studio projects is quite fragmented. In terms of skills and process, the School should explore delivering them through a shared context to serve the final thesis project more explicitly.
- 11.2 The School should consider a clear framework of support for the 60 credit Design Studio 8 – Final major project module in relationship to deliverables and timescale so that the students feel supported to deliver the outcomes.

12. Advice

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.

- 12.1 The Board encourages the School to keep exploring opportunities for cross-disciplinary collaboration. There is potential to share modules and student briefs with those from other design disciplines at the Locksbrook campus, providing students with the chance to collaborate across disciplines. This approach could also foster opportunities for staff research collaboration.
- 12.2 It is important to consider developing relationships with engineers and other specialist professionals to enhance the student experience and strengthen real-world, practice-based learning.

13. Delivery of graduate attributes

It should be noted that where the visiting board considered graduate attributes to have been met, no commentary is offered. Where concerns were noted (or an attribute clearly not met), commentary is supplied. Finally, where academic outcomes suggested a graduate attribute was particularly positively demonstrated, commentary is supplied.

13.1 Graduate Attributes for Part 1

The Board confirmed that the BA (Hons) Architecture programme pathways had the potential to meet the Part 1 Graduate Attributes if developed as anticipated.

14. Review of work against Themes and Values

It should be noted that where the visiting board considered the Themes and Values to have been met, no commentary is offered. Where concerns were noted (or a T&V were clearly not met), commentary is supplied. Finally, where academic outcomes suggested a T&V was particularly positively demonstrated, commentary is supplied.

Themes and Values for Part 1

The Board confirmed that the BA (Hons) Architecture pathways had the potential to meet the themes and values if developed as anticipated.

15. Other information

15.1 Student numbers (from the School)

BA (Hons) Architecture: 90

15.2 Documentation provided

The Department provided all documentation as required by the Procedures for Validation.

16. Notes of meetings

These notes will not form part of the published report but will be made available on request. The full set of notes will be issued to the full visiting board.

- Meeting with the Head of Institution
- Meeting with architecture budget holder and course leaders
- Meeting with students
- Meeting with staff