RIBA

Royal Institute of British Architects

Report of the RIBA Full Visiting Board to Queen's University Belfast

Date of visiting board: 24-25 June 2021
Confirmed by RIBA Education Committee: 29 July 2021

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1   Details of institution hosting course/s   (report part A)
School of Natural and Built Environment: Architecture
Queen's University Belfast
David Keir Building
Stranmillis Road
Belfast
BT9 5AG

2   Architecture Lead
Head of School   Greg Keeffe
Head of Discipline   Sarah Lappin

Course Leaders
Part 1 Course Leader   Nuala Flood
Part 2 Course Leader   Colm Moore
Part 3 Course Leader   Tarla MacGabhann

3   Course/s offered for validation
Part 1 Bachelor of Science in Architecture with Honours
Part 2 Master of Architecture
Part 3 Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Practice in Architecture

4   Awarding body
Queen's University Belfast

5   The visiting board
Harbinder Birdi   chair/practitioner
Sara Biscaya   academic
Alison Coutinho   practitioner
Cameron Wilson   academic
Sophie Bailey   RIBA validation manager

Scott Sworts   observer

6   Procedures and criteria for the visit
The visiting board was carried out under the *RIBA procedures for validation and validation criteria for UK and international courses and examinations in architecture* (published July 2011, and effective from September 2011)*;* this document is available at www.architecture.com.

7   Recommendation of the Visiting Board
On the 29 July 2021 the RIBA Education Committee confirmed that the following courses and qualifications are unconditionally revalidated:

Part 1 Bachelor of Science in Architecture with Honours
Part 2 Master of Architecture
Part 3 Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Practice in Architecture

The next RIBA visiting board will take place in 2026.

8   Academic position statement
(Statement written by the school)

Queen's University Architecture offers unique strengths to empower our students, staff and wider community to address global challenges while giving back to the communities we serve. Our excellence in transdisciplinary collaboration set us at the heart of our School of Natural and Built Environment, (with its unique mix of complimentary disciplines Civil Engineering, Planning, Archaeology and Geography), in the only Russell Group university on the island of Ireland. As the University sets new Strategy 2030 goals – including "securing inclusive and cohesive communities" and "promoting a healthy life for all" – we see ourselves uniquely placed to help deliver these aims in partnership across and beyond the university.

QUB Architecture holds fast to a notion of **reciprocity between academia and practice** as a means of shaping and expanding the discipline. Our Professor Alan Jones acting as RIBA President, our embedding up-and-coming practitioners in fractional posts as permanent members of staff, the appointment of multiple practitioners as Honorary Professors and our PhD by Practice exemplify this position. QUB Architecture's research strength -- 90% staff have been submitted in the last two REFs – ensures that cutting-edge knowledge for, by, in and about design is arriving directly into studios and lectures at all levels. We see our declaration of the Climate Emergency in 2019 as both indicative and elemental to our approach – though we were already highly ranked in the Guardian League Table, we were willing to examine how and what we teach in order to address enormous international challenges head-on with our students.

Our position as an excellent research university in **Northern Ireland** also sets us apart from other schools in the UK – in the post-Brexit context, we can avail of multiple opportunities not open to other universities. As one of the UK's oldest schools of Architecture, (founded 1965), we are able to build on local traditions of industry and on our internationally-dispersed alumni network. Our growing relationship with University College Dublin, with whom we share teaching and research strengths in Climate Action, Humanities and Design, allows us to react to global challenges in a holistic manner. These links are extremely valuable, both to the creative approaches to pedagogy, and for us to address government policy on both sides of the Irish/UK border which demand significant, vision-led thinking and solutions to cope with the Climate Emergency. QUB and UCD are in the process of starting an all-island Built Environment Think Tank. As this centre develops, we will exploit our considerable links to other areas of expertise at QUB including those with whom have funded teaching and research relationships as the Institute for Global Food Security, Sonic Arts Research Centre and Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice.

For both staff and students, we see **leadership** as a responsibility of our practice, both in and outside of the university. Students founded the Queen's Climate Action Network in 2020 and were highlighted in

national architectural press for their activity. Our local leadership ties closely to staff research – we have been a driving force behind political action in Belfast City Centre, we act on the Belfast High Street Task Force, the Ministerial Advisory Group for Architecture, Sustainable NI, the Resilience and Sustainability Board, and we have driven forward a major public initiative for the Department of Infrastructure to improve public spaces across Belfast and London/Derry post-Covid. Our annual Public Co Lab, which brings together undergraduate and master's students with real clients, encapsulates student engagement with multiple stakeholders and has had measurable impact on numerous community groups, researchers and artistic audiences. Beyond Northern Ireland, our staff have acted as assessors on EU Horizon 2020 research council panels, curated and judged at the Venice Biennale over numerous years, led organisations such as the Architectural Humanities Research Association and acted as founders of the All-Ireland Architectural Research Group. We have been invited to act as external examiners at some of the most prestigious UK and EU schools of architecture, including the Bartlett, Newcastle, Kingston, Manchester and Delft. Our research leadership has been recognised by the highest level of funders including support from the Leverhulme Trust, NERC Innovate, ESRC, AHRC, GCRF and the Getty Foundation. Our international research and teaching contacts continue to grow, with links to universities such as Oxford, Harvard, TU Delft, Angola's Agostinho Neto University and Keio University.

The BSc, MArch and Part III courses at QUB distinguish themselves from others through a **fundamental emphasis on a studio culture** of co-learning and co-support. This can be seen in our commitment to maintaining a working space for every student and a relatively small cohort size which encourages a shared learning experience for our students. We are stronger due to our increasingly high-profile part time staff and university tutors, but we are also unique among many schools of architecture in ensuring **full-time pedagogical input** into all modules and all studio groups. While the demography of staff and students has changed substantially in recent years, (60% of our students now hail from outside NI,) we see ourselves holding essential role in the Northern Irish architectural culture.

QUB Architecture is also unique in its commitment to **resourcing communication skills** and in **embedding technology** as a primary design endeavour. Throughout the course, we invest heavily on skills acquisition for our students, including our all-school Skills Bazaars at which current students and recent graduates showcase their abilities across a range of tools, from hand drawing to 3d computer modelling to formulating a PhD. Likewise, our Humanities strand includes intensive teaching of writing and research skills including the development of a Writing Portfolio in Part I and Dissertation at Part II. Since declaring the Climate Emergency, we have mapped and begun restructuring resources to address technology for Climate Action vertically through the school, and a tectonic understanding of design runs throughout the Part I and II courses, culminating in the students' MArch II thesis designs.

With our vertical studios in BSc and MArch, we are able to embed the research of staff into the student experience, leading to **real diversity** in the student offer. We maintain an active Year Out experience for students including helping them move into the world of work and reflecting on their experiences before choosing their next steps. The Part III continues to be attractive to students working across UK and Ireland, dealing with different legislative jurisdictions. We ask the students to become increasingly independent as they move up through the school and have been heartened in recent years by student-led activity, particularly in relation to the Climate Emergency.

We see this variety and growing maturity across the three courses as key to ensuring **students attain the skills and knowledge that the contemporary profession demands**. In the BSc, Stage I focuses on gaining requisite skills and confidence post-school, including working in groups and stating a position on architecture, while Stages II and III ask the students to begin formalising their approach to practice through aligning with staff research interests. In MArch, the students choose from a variety of studios, ranging from approaches to conservation to envisioning the spatiality of the food/energy nexus. We task students with understanding the landscape of the profession in Stage III and MArch II and in developing their own ethical stance. Part III students are then empowered to address the specifics of practice through engagement with specialists from across the UK and Ireland. This culture is further strengthened by a structured student-to-staff feedback system and by our student-led Architecture Society, particularly active in navigating the online context since March 2020.

We see ourselves at a key moment of strength in the history of the school. We have taken the opportunity to learn multiple novel ways of teaching and learning during the pandemic. This willingness to seek out new technologies will bolster our ability to deliver the RIBA's Way Ahead aspirations, help prepare our students to address global challenges through design thinking while continuing to grow our links between world-class research and teaching.

9   Standard requirements for continued recognition
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

10   Commendations
The visiting board made the following commendations:

10.1   The board commends the support provided by all staff and the leadership team to the students in response to the pandemic. This was evident in the quality of the students' work at all levels achieved in testing times.

10.2   The board commends the quality of model making at BSc level and the graphic skills and representation at M Arch level.

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 board commends the school's aspirations as outlined within the academic position statement; however, the school should reflect on which aspects are a priority and achievable with the resources available, develop a strategy of implementation.

11.2   The board recognises that as a result of the pandemic, there has been an increased volume of staff administration and pastoral requirements and the appropriate support mechanisms should be made available for both staff and students going forward.

11.3   The board noted the improvement of the integration of technology both within the BSc and M Arch, however, the school should consider the teaching expertise that may be required to further improve the integration of sustainability within the design projects.

12.   Advice
The visiting board offers the following advice to the Department on desirable, but not essential improvements, which, it is felt, would assist course development and raise standards.

12.1   The board advises that the students should be encouraged to become more critically reflective at key points in their design process, which would enable a more concise and focussed approach to the presentation of the design portfolio and minimise the overproduction and repetition of work.

12.2   The board recognises the ambition for growth; however, the school should ensure that the strong design ethos and student experience is maintained through sufficient studio space and additional staff resource.

12.3   The board recommends that greater emphasis is made on management, practice and law, particularly at undergraduate level to prepare students for their year out.

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12.4   The board acknowledges the general principle of increased research active staff members, including design research-based practitioners; however, the nature of the research should be embedded and should enhance the students' experience, learning and output.

13   Delivery of academic position
The board felt that the academic position statement accurately reflected the school's ethos and identity.

14   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.

Graduate Attributes for Parts 1 & 2
The Board confirmed that all of the Parts 1 and 2 graduate attributes were met by graduates of the Bachelor of Science in Architecture with Honours and the Master of Architecture.

15   Review of work against criteria
It should be noted that where the visiting board considered a criterion to have been met, no commentary is offered. Where concerns were noted (or a criterion clearly not met), commentary is supplied. Finally, where academic outcomes suggested a criterion was particularly positively demonstrated, commentary is supplied.

Graduate Criteria for Parts 1 & 2 and Professional Criteria at part 3
The Board confirmed that all the Parts 1 and 2 graduate criteria were met by graduates of the Bachelor of Science in Architecture with Honours and the Master of Architecture. The Board confirmed that all the Professional Criteria at part 3 were met by graduates of the Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Practice in Architecture

16   Other information

16.1   Student numbers

Part 1 - BSc (Hons) Architecture

Stage 1	15-16	16-17	17-18	18-19	19-20	20-21
Enrolled Stage 1	58	54	51	42	81	66
plus students Repeating Stage 1	3	6	3	1	1	3
less withdrew/transferred before assessment	4	2	2	6	5	
less Failed	3	6	1	1	5	
Passed Stage 1	54	52	50	36	72	

less withdrew/transferred after assessment	1	3	2	1	5	

Stage 2	15-16	16-17	17-18	18-19	19-20	20-21
Enrolled Stage 2	48	53	49	48	42	67
plus Direct Entry to Stage 2	1	1	2	1	4	0
plus students Repeating Stage 2	3	4	5	1	0	3
less withdrew/transferred before assessment	1	2	2	5	3	
less Failed	4	3	8	2	3	
Passed Stage 2	47	53	46	43	40	
less withdrew/transferred after assessment	0	3	2	2	0	

Stage 3	15-16	16-17	17-18	18-19	19-20	20-21
Enrolled Stage 3	47	47	49	47	41	41
plus Direct Entry to Stage 3	0	0	0	0	0	0
plus students Repeating Stage 3	4	5	0	1	0	0
less withdrew/transferred before assessment	1	1	1	7	2	
less Failed	2	4	1	1	0	
Passed Final Examination	48	47	47	40	39	
Results						
1st	13	12	14	9	6	
2:1	27	24	23	26	30	
2:2	8	11	10	5	2	
3rd	0	0	0	0	1	
Total No. Part I Graduates	48	47	47	40	39	

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Part 2 - MArch Architecture

MArch 1	15-16	16-17	17-18	18-19	19-20	20-21
Entrants from the School's Part I	36	20	26	19	19	21
plus entrants from other Schools	8	11	7	11	13	6
plus entrants from overseas	6	1	3	1	5	12
plus students repeating this Year	2	1	0	0	0	1
Total intake to the First Year of the Part II*	52	33	36	31	37	40
less withdrew/transferred before assessment	7	3	1	0	6	
less Failed	4	0	1	0	0	
Passed Stage 1 (Part II)	41	30	33	31	31	
less deferred/withdrew/transferred after assessment	2	0	1	1	0	
MArch 2	**15-16**	**16-17**	**17-18**	**18-19**	**19-20**	**20-21**
Continuing to Year 2 (Part II)	22	42	33	35	30	31
plus Direct Entry to Year 2 (Part II)	2	0	1	0	0	1
plus students Repeating Year 2 (Part II)	4	1	2	0	1	1
less withdrew/transferred before assessment	1	1	4	1	2	
less Failed	1	2	0	1	1	
Passed Final Examination	**26**	**40**	**32**	**33**	**28**	
Results						
Distinction	8	10	16	11	9	
Commendation	12	26	12	18	17	
Pass	6	4	4	4	2	
Total No of Part 2 Graduates	26	40	32	33	28	

Part 3 – Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Practice and Practical Experience

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
No of Candidates who took Exam	41	46	38	32	25
No of Candidates who Passed	30	35	29	22	22

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16.2   Documentation provided
The faculty provided all advance documentation in accordance with the validation procedures.

17   Notes of meetings
On request, the RIBA will issue a copy of the minutes taken from the following meetings. These notes will not form part of the published report but will be made available on request.

- Budget holder and course leaders
- Students
- Head of institution
- External examiners
- Staff