Report of the RIBA visiting board to Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University

Date of visiting board: 22-23 November 2017
Confirmed by RIBA Education Committee: 09 February 2018
1 Details of institution hosting course/s
Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University
111 Ren-ai Road
Dushu Lake Higher Education Town
Suzhou Industrial Park
Suzhou
Jiangsu 215123, China

2 Head of Architecture Department
Pierre-Alain Croset (until December 5, 2017)
Gisela Loehlein (since December 6, 2017)

3 Course/s offered for validation
Master of Architectural Design (part 2)

4 Course leader/s
Christian Gänshirt

5 Awarding body
University of Liverpool

6 The visiting board
David Dernie academic / chair
Musa Garba practitioner / vice chair
Lilly Kudic academic
Negar Mihanyar practitioner
ZHU Xiaofeng regional representative
Sophie Bailey validation manager

7 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.

8 Recommendation of the Visiting Board
On the 09 February 2018 the RIBA Education Committee confirmed that the following courses and qualifications are unconditionally revalidated:

Master of Architectural Design (part 2)

The next RIBA visiting board will take place in: 2022

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 Academic position statement
(Statement written by the school)

1. Introduction
Founded in 2011, the Department of Architecture at Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU) is part of a young Sino-British university situated in Suzhou, a city which falls within the greater Shanghai area. With construction of the university’s new South Campus underway, in 2016, the Department moved into its new Design Building which it shares with the Department of Industrial Design, the building’s facilities of the highest international standards.

Set in China, but closely connected with the University of Liverpool and the UK framework of architectural education, the Department’s aim is to offer a new global model of architectural education. The fostering of the students’ critical thinking skills is an important and distinctive characteristic of its Bachelor, Master and PhD programmes. In an environment that is fast-changing, the Department seeks to educate students in order to enable them to take advantage of arising opportunities. This includes the possibility of working as a “liberal professional,” which has only recently become an option in China, and offers new ways of practicing architecture for current and future generations of architects.

As a relatively new and uniquely positioned architecture school, the Department thus affirms and advances the merits of architectural education as vital to developing critical thinking skills for the longer-term future.

2. Department Identity and Vision
With a faculty that contributes experiences in practice and research in more than twenty countries, the international make-up of the Department of Architecture at XJTLU is unique in China. It brings together traditions and opportunities from the East and the West, and seeks to provide the best of both perspectives in architectural and urban design, offering new views on the local context as well as on global issues.

As China continues to undergo processes of modernisation, the Department is particularly aware of its responsibility in educating a new generation of architects who face enormous challenges. There is an emerging interest in topics such as the environment, building tectonics, cultural heritage, and user-centred design, as well as growing recognition of the necessity to reinvest in the extant built environment through urban regeneration and the refurbishment of existing building stock.

These issues and concerns are viewed by the Department as a challenge and as an opportunity, and it responds through its focus on new human-centred approaches to learning, practicing and researching architectural design, in order to nurture attitudes that will prove valuable
in the future. For there is a need – not only in China – for Architects who are critical thinkers and highly qualified professionals. Both the undergraduate and the postgraduate programmes centre on applied architectural design studio modules (50%), which are supported by a balanced mix of humanities-based and technical modules (25% each).

The Department’s research concentrates on three headline research areas:
1. History, Theory and Heritage offers connections with Suzhou and other heritage sites in China, addressing, in particular, questions pertaining to multiculturalism and trans-nationalism.
2. Computational Design and Fabrication develops partnerships with innovative high-tech industries in the context of Suzhou Industrial Park (SIP), with research in the processes of design and professional practice key areas of interest.
3. Urban Ecologies engages with the changing nature of global urbanisation, with a focus on radically new approaches to the study of cities and their environment that are informed by research in science, technology and sustainable construction, as well as by studies in sociology, art, design, and aesthetics.

The Department is also committed to Research by Design, an experimental form of research that is specific to the architectural discipline, with less conventional research outcomes, such as prototypes, projects, buildings, components, and exhibitions. To this end, the Design Research Centre has been established to facilitate small-scale pilot projects. It has a flexible staff structure, and involves a number of permanent faculty members, along with local professional architects who will contribute their specific competences in architectural design, planning, and construction.

3. Academic Agenda
The following key points are based on staff views, student feedback, internal University reports, and external reports by examiners and professional bodies:

Recent exceptional areas of activity
International validation of the BEng(Hons) Architecture programme at Part 1 level by the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in February 2015, a first for a Chinese university.
Award of candidate course status to the Master of Architectural Design programme by RIBA in December 2016, also a first for a Chinese University.
Excellent profile of an international faculty with experience in practice and research in more than 20 countries directly supporting undergraduate and postgraduate learning.
Location of the Department in a new building, shared with the Department of Industrial Design, with a strong architectural identity, offering an ideal showcase for its staff and students in spaces with a particular character.
Initiatives such as international workshops, student competitions, and, summer research projects within the framework of XJTLU’s Summer
Undergraduate Fellowships (SURF), positively impacting the programmes’ development. Establishment of the first online architectural magazine in English in China, Masterplanning the Future (MPTF), which is student-led and has a continuously growing number of students actively participating.

Individuality of the learning environment in the Chinese context Positioned in Suzhou, both a heritage city (classical gardens recognised as UNESCO World Heritage Sites) and an extremely dynamic new city, now the fourth largest concentration of economic activity in China in terms of GDP. Unique offering of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in English in China, taught by international educators. Excellent resources on a new campus, open to the vibrant life of one of China’s flagship development projects, the Suzhou Industrial Park (SIP), within which the University and more than 100 Fortune 500 companies operate, offering a high quality of life. Excellent building resources supporting a vibrant studio culture, with dedicated spaces for design studios, reviews, and physical modelling, as well as for a materials library. Recruitment of students from amongst the top 5% of Chinese high school graduates, and a progressive increase of international students.

Differences between Bachelor and Master degrees
BEng programme: provides a clear sequence of design studios with the gradual introduction of ideas and skills, with a focus on the attainment of personal and professional confidence in order to take advantage of practice experience.
MArchDes programme: fosters student autonomy and responsibility in pursuing individual interests in view of future professional career development opportunities, with the second year framed as a “research by design” year.
MArchDes programme: connection with XJTLU’s Master programmes in Urban Planning and Urban Design (with the Urban Planning and Design Department) in year one creates unique possibilities for interdisciplinary design research.

Relevance to professional practice
Design studio themes are strongly connected with real-world problems and necessities in China and beyond; lecture courses and coursework are related to contemporary issues and current concerns. Practicing architects in Suzhou and Shanghai contribute as part-time tutors and visiting critics, and present guest lectures, lead site visits, and offer internships for students. Establishment of a Design Research Centre which seeks to actively involve staff, students and local practicing architects in the development of pilot projects. Graduates work in top architectural offices, and assist in strengthening the connections of the Department to local practice.

Creative criteria delivering course content
Innovative learning environment that fosters independent, creative and responsible designers with a thoughtful, research-led and imaginative approach to place-making. Close collaboration with the two other Departments of the Built Environment Cluster (Urban Planning & Design and Civil Engineering), as well as with the Department of Industrial Design (with shared facilities in the new Design Building), developing a culture of teamwork and a multidisciplinary approach to design. Flexible programme design, with the active participation of a dynamic faculty, delivering responsive, changing projects that complement and extend core learning whilst still maintaining criteria fulfilling content.

11 **Commendations**
The visiting board made the following commendations:

11.1 The board commends the intention of the programme to provide a rich alternative to postgraduate provision in architecture within China and the clear achievement of the current leadership of the school.

11.2 The board commends the evident improvement in studio outputs over the three initial cohorts.

11.3 The board commends the extensive facilities, the design of the studios, digital equipment and in particular the material library.

11.4 The board commends the engaged staff and student body and the low SSR that enables a focus on the learning pathways of individual students.

11.5 The board commends the clarity of assessment as perceived by the students.

12 **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.

12.1 The school is required to evidence further rigour and depth in the academic portfolio in terms of design, particularly in response to physical and cultural contexts, demonstrating more sophisticated and resolved responses to issues defined by the brief.

12.2 The school is required to fully and more consistently demonstrate the integration of constructional technologies, including three-dimensionally.

12.3 The school is required to more clearly demonstrate the influence of research and innovation on design studio work and its impact on the strategy, spatial and detailed design resolution.

12.4 The school is required to provide facilities and support, to ensure that all students can develop the relevant representational skills for the programme.
13. **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.

13.1 The school is advised to initiate further collaboration with other universities both nationally and internationally in order to broaden student experience and enhance programme development.

13.2 The school is advised to develop a strategic growth strategy in order to maintain current levels of resource for all students as numbers increase.

13.3 The school should consider the development of a more robust moderation and assessment system as the board considers the marking standards to be generous.

13.4 The school is encouraged to provide adequate pastoral care for students, specialised counselling and suitable support for mental well-being.

13.5 The school is advised to continue building relationships with local and national practices and to support students seeking career advice upon graduation.

14 **Delivery of academic position**
The board commented that the position statement had longevity, addressing identity, vision and academic agenda.

15 **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 Part 2**
The Board confirmed that all Part 2 graduate attributes were met by graduates.

16 **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 Part 2**
The Board confirmed that all Part 2 criteria were met by graduates.
17 Other information

17.1 Student numbers
Total number of students in the programme: 20 (as of January 2018)
Current Year 1 (2017 intake): 12 students
Current Year 2 (2016 intake): 8 students
First graduating cohort (2015 intake): 6 students

17.2 Documentation provided
The School provided all advance documentation in accordance with the validation procedures.