



Royal Institute of British Architects

Report of the RIBA exploratory board to Staffordshire University

Date of visiting board: 25 & 26 April 2024
Confirmed by the RIBA: 31 May 2024

- 1 Details of institution hosting course**
Department of Creative Industries
School of Digital, Technology, Innovation and Business
Staffordshire University
College Road
Stoke-on-Trent, ST4 2DE, UK
- 2 Head of Department**
Rachel Heeley (HoD, Creative Industries)
Dr Islam Abohela (Course Leader)
Dr James Robertson (Senior Lecturer)
- 3 Course offered for candidate course status**
BArch (Hons) Architecture
- 4 Awarding body**
Staffordshire University
- 5 The visiting board**
Andrew Wilson – Chair
Carol Norton – Vice Chair
Frazer Bufton
Stephanie Beasley-Suffolk – RIBA Validation Manager

Stephanie Beasley-Suffolk, validation manager – in attendance
Tracy Flanagan - RIBA validation manager – observer
Joshua Brooks – RIBA validation manager - observer
- 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 31 May 2024 the RIBA confirmed candidate course status for Part 1 of the following course:

BArch (Hons) Architecture

The designation ‘Candidate Course for Validation’ implies that the course has been judged to have the potential to meet RIBA criteria, 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)

A civic approach

Through our institution’s approach as a civic university, our ambition is to be a conduit for our local and regional community, providing and engaging in dialogue and opportunities related to architecture and the built environment. Strategically located in one of the most deprived areas in the UK and having historically suffered from underinvestment and valuing of its distinct cultural and architectural identity on a practical level, we aim to foster a relationship with local stakeholders, built environment professionals and, of course, the next generation of such professionals who are both curious and caring of this unique place. As such, our offer is a curriculum underpinned by these concerns, and focused on professional skills that we hope will empower students to engage with their community, to take full advantage of Stoke-on-Trent as a location of significant architectural possibilities and to elicit gradual and meaningful change within the city and its hinterland. As such, many of our studio briefs feature live projects and present opportunities for students to engage with stakeholders from the public and private sectors, to discuss regeneration strategies in the city and region. These projects are supported by an interdisciplinary environment where staff and technicians from other areas of the university provide students with a multidisciplinary approach to architectural design. We would like to think that this approach to teaching and learning awakens a consciousness of future responsibility and professionalism in students’ practice.

Through these connections, we see our pedagogical attitude as embracing both empirical as well as theoretical methodologies, where learning through exploration with a ‘grassroots’ emphasis is at the heart of our approach. Whether through direct engagement with others, or through established pedagogies such as ‘flipped classroom’ sessions, we believe that students should be given the benefit of learning through doing and making – and from each other - as well as through informed discussion with staff.

Informally, we recognise the importance of effective communication and debate of current issues that affect society, and so encourage discussion and interaction between cohorts, often prompted by students’ interests in architecture and regeneration and a sense of concern for both the global, and the specific – and often home - context of Stoke-on-Trent.

A community of learners, teachers, researchers, and professionals

With the course being specifically designed to have an impact on the locale, the city, and the wider region, our aspiration is to attract students from other

areas who have a particular interest in regeneration, community engagement, and sustainability. The course responds to its locale and to the current actioning of the Levelling Up agenda in Stoke-on-Trent with a special emphasis on retrofitting and repurposing of buildings, as well as intervening with new development to ‘stitch’ together a fragmented urban fabric. As such, we feel that this affords us both a serious responsibility and a special opportunity to develop a holistic approach to professional competencies through a variety of programmatic contexts, integrating the technology-based modules with the design-based modules over the three years of the programme. Similarly, our close relationship with the university’s Estates department and their sustainability engineer enables students to visit campus buildings, such as the award-winning Woodlands Nursery, focusing on the implementation of net-zero strategies.

As previously mentioned, we have also developed collaborations with cultural organisations in the area, and with community groups such as B-Arts, the British Ceramics Biennial, the Portland Inn Project, and the youth community group at YMCA; collaborations which, in studio projects, have encouraged students to consider design ethics, user experience, and to explore strategies for community-led design.

As a course focused on professional skills, the close connections that we have fostered with local architectural practices through the North Staffordshire Society of Architects, and with other design and construction practices, have been invaluable. We host monthly meetings with society members in our studio space, attended by practitioners, architecture staff and student representatives. Accordingly, local practices feed into our curriculum with, for example, Level 6 students spending a period of time with such practices as an integral part of our Professional Practice module. This module, along with the university’s Careers department, supports students in the development of their CVs, portfolios, and interview preparation. Local practices also input into the course in a very practical way by offering positions to our students when available (currently one from Level 5 and one from Level 6). Our relationship with the NSSA, however, is very much of mutual benefit, as in addition to a focus on student development (recognized, for example in the annual Drawing Award offered by the society), we are currently exploring, as part of the society’s LIF funding proposals, plans to host a symposium at the university early next academic year, which will see contributions from both practitioners and academics.

As part of our responsibility to support and promote well-rounded future professionals and citizens, we are passionate about providing an open and diverse learning environment for our students, that promotes and practices equity, diversity, and inclusion. As a reflection of the diversity of both our students and staff, we aim to ensure parity within the curriculum, such as a global, multicultural approach to the history and theory of architecture within the Design Cultures module. On a pragmatic level, we also accommodate students who have caring responsibilities by offering hybrid teaching and learning opportunities during school holidays.

As a method of charting personal growth and professional development, throughout the course, students are expected to keep a reflective diary and

sketchbook as a record of their architectural enquiries and curiosities; be they through lectures, tutorials, observations, or other ideas for exploration. Along with the portfolio, this offers an opportunity for continuous reflection and progression.

All permanent academic staff are research-active, implementing research-led teaching into the curriculum, for example in the areas of co-design with communities, history and theory of architecture and sustainable construction technologies. Where possible, students are offered opportunities to collaborate in research projects led by staff, with the aforementioned STARS scheme, providing such opportunities through provision of student bursaries for Level 4 and 5 students to support staff in these endeavours, such as for the staff research project, Film, Architecture and Science Fiction. This initiative also offers students the chance to engage with interdisciplinary research, as they are able to apply to work on projects including, but not necessarily limited to, the field of architecture.

10. Commendations

The Board made the following commendations.

- 10.1 The opportunities created for collaboration amongst students within their course.
- 10.2 The levels of support offered to students by the staff which enables them to develop into articulate, confident individuals.
- 10.3 Engagement and collaboration with local industry, practice and stakeholders, which fully embraces the civic agenda of the university.

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 school should ensure that the students demonstrate a wider appreciation, understanding and application of current architectural precedent across all studio culture, technology, and environmental modules. This is to ensure the graduate attribute requiring an understanding of a complex body of knowledge, some at the current boundaries of the discipline, is demonstrated.

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 school should give further thought to the priorities of craft and tectonics stated in their course aims and the degree to which these are currently being delivered through studio work and taught modules. It should consider the opportunity this would present as a springboard for design experimentation.

- 12.2 Professional practice course could be strengthened further through the inclusion of ethics and CDM (construction design management) regulations.
- 12.3 There could be a more explicit link between precedents used in design cultures and how they inform the studio projects.
- 12.4 There could be a more explicit link between the materials, environment and technology modules and use of exemplary current practice at the scale and typology appropriate to what is being addressed in studio.
- 12.5 The library collection should have more contemporary and relevant texts to reinforce the course ethos and priorities.
- 12.6 Course staff should engage with students and explore their ideas on how best to use the studio space.
- 12.7 The school should review whether the assessment of technology can integrate more fully with studio projects from semester one of Level 5 onwards.
- 12.8 The students should focus on the quality of their drawings rather than producing multiple images from a single 3D CAD model. The essential architectural drawings of plans, sections and elevations should be better evidenced in the portfolios.
- 12.9 The school should continue to review the balance between the breadth of projects currently offered, versus the opportunities that would come from exploring projects in more depth. As part of this the school could further explore the possibility of integration across modules to add to the depth of the projects, particularly materials, environment and technology.
- 12.10 The school should consider appointing an experienced external examiner who is a practitioner as a second external examiner. This would be in line with good practice, particularly as the course grows.
- 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 Bachelor of Architecture, BArch (Hons) 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 Bachelor of Architecture BArch (Hons) had the potential to meet the Part 1 Graduate Attributes if developed as anticipated.

15 Other information

15.1 Student numbers (from the School)

Bachelor of Architecture, BArch (Hons): 34

15.2 Documentation provided

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

16 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. The full set of notes will be issued to the full visiting board.**

- Head of Institution
- Architecture budget holder and course leaders
- Students
- Staff