
Royal Institute of British Architects

**Report of the RIBA visiting board
to the University of Nottingham, Ningbo,
China (UNNC)**

Date of visiting board: 14 & 15 October 2019

Confirmed by RIBA Education Committee: 12 February 2020

- 1 Details of institution hosting course/s**
Department of Architecture and Built Environment
University of Nottingham, Ningbo, China (UNNC)
199 Taikang East Road,
Ningbo, 315100, China
- 2 Head of Department of Architecture and Built Environment**
Dr Ali Cheshmehzangi
- 3 Courses offered for validation**
BArch (Hons) Architecture/BEng (Hons) Architecture
- 4 Awarding body**
University of Nottingham
- 5 The visiting board**
Professor Don Gray – Chair, academic
Peter Garstecki, practitioner
John Ashton – practitioner
Paula Craft-Pegg, academic
Andy Kershaw - regional representative

Stephanie Beasley-Suffolk – validation manager – in attendance.
- 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 Proposals of the visiting board**
At its meeting on 12 February 2020 the RIBA Education Committee confirmed continued validation of the following programme:

BArch (Hons) Architecture//BEng (Hons) Architecture, Part 1

The next full visiting board will take place in 2024.
- 8 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

9 Academic position statement (written by the School)

Our programme is built upon an understanding of the local context, our students, and developing the future pathways of Architecture. Our student-centred programme caters for the needs of the students in all cohorts. We recognise and unlock the individual's potential, by providing diverse studio structures, strong streams of architectural education, and pathways that enable our graduates to become responsible architects/designers for a better future. Focused on 'sustainability' and 'innovation', our approach is recognised through a range of teaching and learning activities, forward-thinking research, and community engagement activities. We teach and practice innovative ways of achieving sustainability by various means, from sustainable design methods to the development of social, cultural and environmental pathways for sustainability. Over the years, we have provided new visions to contemporary challenges of our societies, foresee what may seem to become crises, predict and respond to those that may require architects' input and innovative solutions. We fully recognise the context-specific issues and continuously respond to those rapidly developing paradigms. We explore these collaboratively and responsively.

The department stands as a truly global laboratory for architecture and engineering, yet sensitive to contextual characters and to societal and market demands. With our diverse team of students and academics, and with programmes that span the architectural and building sciences, the department aims to dialogically 'bridge' the skills, knowledge, and practices of the West with those of the East, informing its teaching by cutting-edge research, and engaging with actors of associated industries in region. Consistent with the ethos of the home department in Nottingham, UK, all programmes seek to provide a critical balance between the cultural, technical, and professional aspects necessary for a rounded education in disciplines of architecture and the built environment, underpinned by diversity in design response, and social and environmental responsibility. These qualities are valued by practice, supporting high levels of graduate employment. They are also highly transferrable and offer exciting opportunities for those pursuing alternative career pathways.

The curriculum is structured on a progression of educational experiences and design challenges. In the Preliminary Year (Year 0), the teaching concentrates on developing English language proficiency, and on practicing and enhancing graphic communication and drawing skills in architecture. International students that meet necessary study prerequisites can skip Year 0 and enter directly to Year 1 of the programme. In Year 1, students undertake appropriately constrained projects in stages. We respect the exploratory nature of the year, which allows students to learn new knowledge, develop new skills, and explore new ideas. In Year 2 students engage with projects framed within the wider context of human settlements, addressing issues of technical and environmental concern. In Year 3, as deeper professional design competence is acquired and practiced, students validate their skills and demonstrate their critical inspiration in more complex projects. We have deliberately structured the Year 1 studios around the energy and talent of our practice-based studio unit leaders. Studios in

Years 2 and 3 are delivered via three vertical studio units that energise peer-to-peer learning by offering mentor-mentee partnerships that bridge the year groups. In Year 3, brief making is informed by a process of rigorous investigation, an ability that, along with creative problem solving, represents key skills that make our graduates distinctive in the eyes of practice. Such quality of work is reflected in our RIBA Bronze nominations, where we believe we have become a strong global competitor. In all three years, we bring in a large number of practitioners as our specialist tutors, guest lecturers, reviewers, and part-time teaching members – providing our students with new design pathways, and daily experiences of the market and context. With such robust linkage with the industry, our graduates have continuously secured summer internship and year-out places in top international and national practices.

The study of historical and artistic precedent – Chinese and international, knowledge of traditional and cutting-edge building design methods, technologies, and techniques, understanding and exploration of principles of building physics and environmental science, and the integration of all such disciplinary domains in coherent architectural designs are central to the programme's aims. Our teaching and learning environments are facilitated by design studios, which – together with support from the taught modules – provide a stimulating platform for inter-year cooperation and collaborative peer learning. Attention to the students' learning experience is core to the pedagogy, with a projected full-time staff-to-student ratio of approximately 1:12. We provide site visits for specific modules, a fully funded fieldtrip in Year 1, and subsidised optional fieldtrips for Year 2 and Year 3 students (both local and international locations). In addition, intercampus exchange opportunities with the home department in the UK and other Universities worldwide, joint studios, and international design workshops, all enrich exposure of students to a broad variety of educational methodologies and design approaches.

The department's rich research base – also based on 'sustainability and innovation' - provides input from leading research excellence in architecture, history and theory, urban design, and environmental design. These are mainstems of our departmental research group, 'Sustainable Built Environment (SBE)'. We continuously secure local and international projects (funded by the government, and the national and international funding bodies) and delve into contemporary issues that require local expertise and/or global response. Tectonics and professional practice streams are delivered by academics with extensive practice experience, supported through contributions made by leading experts from practice and industry. This combination informs a dynamic curriculum that ensures students reap the benefits of cutting-edge research and up to date practice activity. Based on diversity of provided support, our students are able to contextualise the taught content of their studies and practise them in design studio modules. We aim to combine the solid pedagogical tradition of skill development and enhancement of rigorous technical competence promoted by the Chinese higher education system, with the critically informed framework of analysis and design synthesis that characterises UK architectural pedagogies. Our students are engaged with a variety of

multi-level university and departmental activities. More recently, students are more engaged as actors for development of key initiatives in the department, through our system of ABE Agents.

Our success is evident in the quality of our graduates, teaching delivery, and our exhibitions in Ningbo, Shanghai and Hangzhou. Building on the support from the University and the Faculty of Science and Engineering, and through exchanges with the UK department, we aim for reinforcement of research-informed teaching and scholarly activities. This is facilitated by: a reached balance in the staff-to-student ratio, and teaching allocation aligned to individuals' research interest/expertise. In line with the University's Strategy 2020, our teaching and learning (T&L) approach integrates wellbeing and life skills into the curriculum, prioritises inter-campus activities, and promotes digital learning. To achieve these, we regularly develop training and exchange opportunities, and are actively engaged with peer observation and demo classes. We continue to nurture the programme with cutting-edge advances in all its subject areas, yet supporting the development of specialist streams of design investigation with a greater understanding and appreciation of the local context. Research-informed teaching is enhanced by engaging with local and international research and the industry, through our research at the CSET and the SBE Research Group, and in collaboration with the other units. We reflect on such opportunities, and continue to educate and promote innovative ways of achieving sustainability through design practice.

10 Commendations

The visiting board made the following commendations:

- 10.1 The Board was impressed by the ambitious vision for the University and School as described by the Dean, and was reassured to understand that the University will continue to maintain current levels of support for the School.
- 10.2 There is an aspirational range of staff research interests, offering great potential to strengthen and enhance student learning.
- 10.3 Following the 2014 visit, which recommended that local contemporary and historic references should be evidenced in student work, the Board was pleased to see that the School had written briefs for studio projects, which responded to local, regional and global contexts.

11 Conditions

There are no conditions.

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. The university is referred to the RIBA's criteria and procedures for validation for details of mid-term monitoring processes. Failure by the university to satisfactorily resolve action points may result in a course being conditioned by a future visiting board.

12.1 There was a marked difference in the integration of technology and environmental responses across units in the final year. Staff and students should jointly review unit project work and briefs in order to understand how to promote better integration. The School may wish to consider making the best work available to students through publication of exemplar projects on one of the online learning platforms.

12.2 The Board found that requirements of both Chinese and UK professional contexts of regulatory frameworks had not wholly been met, which is a stated ambition in the School's academic position statement. In particular, the requirements of GC4.3 and GC11.1 had not been fully realised in all student portfolios.

The School must put in place a learning strategy and associated learning outcomes which incorporate knowledge of urban design, planning and the skills involved in the planning process (GC4.3), including the regulations and procedures involved in the negotiation and approval of architectural designs. These should include land law, development control, building regulations and health and safety legislation (GC11.1).

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 review the scale and complexity of the third-year design briefs.

13.2 The School is advised to take advantage of the expertise of the Industry Panel and feedback from external examiners.

13.3 The School is encouraged to take advantage of the opportunities which result from its location in a Faculty of Science and Engineering. This could include cross-disciplinary engagement with relevant programmes in other departments.

13.4 The Board advises the School to encourage students to be more engaged with course development, brief writing and project reviews.

13.4 The School should continue to work with its colleagues in CELE to ensure that year 0 remains relevant as a preparatory year for the architecture programme.

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.

14.1 Programme of Architecture

The Board confirmed that all Part 1 graduate attributes were met by graduates of the BArch (Hons) Architecture//BEng (Hons) Architecture, Part 1.

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.

15.1 The Board made no further comments.

16 Other information

16.1 Student numbers – check with school

194, including preliminary year.

16.2 Documentation provided

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

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. The full set of notes will be issued to the mid-term panel and the next full visiting board.**

- Meeting with budget holder and course leaders
- Meeting with students
- Meeting with head of institution
- Meeting with external examiners
- Meeting with staff