



# Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of Architectural Association School of Architecture, May 2017

## Section 1: Outcome of the monitoring visit

1 From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the review team concludes that the Architectural Association School of Architecture (the School) has made acceptable progress with implementing the action plan from the June 2016 [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\)](#).

## Section 2: Changes since the last QAA review

2 The School recruited 756 full-time students for the 2016-17 intake to a range of taught undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. This is a reduction of 52, or just over 6 per cent compared to the 2015-16 intake. The 2016-17 total includes 458, or 61 per cent Tier 4 Sponsored international students. There are 15 full-time and 113 part-time academic staff teaching the provision. Significant changes since the 2016 Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) include the resignation of the School Director, who is leaving in July 2017 prior to completion of his fixed term of office. A committee has been set up to lead the search for a replacement. A Teaching Committee has been created, chaired by a new full-time Head of Teaching and Learning. The School is undergoing scrutiny by QAA for the award of Taught Degree Awarding Powers.

## Section 3: Findings from the monitoring visit

3 The overall outcome of the monitoring visit, that the School has made acceptable progress, has been informed by the following findings. Actions in response to the one area of good practice, eight recommendations and three affirmations arising from the 2016 Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) have been implemented in line with the action plan schedule. Some actions will result in implementation for the 2017-18 academic year, so it is too early to evaluate their effectiveness. In a few instances, actions require further revision or development to achieve full implementation. This is evident in the recommendation to make rigorous use of progression and achievement data in monitoring, and the affirmation concerning the introduction of a process for the internal monitoring and review of undergraduate programmes. The admission of students is managed effectively and the School continues to make good use of external reference points, both academic and professional. Work is continuing to embed a consistent and robust system of programme monitoring for undergraduate programmes.

4 The School has continued to build on the effectiveness of its student support mechanisms, which were reported as good practice in the 2016 review. The role of the new full-time Head of Teaching and Learning includes clear responsibility for overseeing pastoral and academic support for students.

5 The actions taken in response to the eight recommendations from the 2016 review have been effective overall, but some work is ongoing. The School has mapped and revised the alignment of the Foundation and Year 1 undergraduate programme to more accurately reflect the levels of *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). In relation to the recommendation to make rigorous use of

achievement and progression data, valuable data sets are being produced by the School and some limited scrutiny of statistical data is evident in the minutes of academic committees. Annual monitoring reports for the graduate programmes give systematic consideration to student statistical data. Such use of data has yet to be embedded in the new course/unit annual evaluation reports for the undergraduate provision.

6 A new process for overseeing the design and development of undergraduate programme units has been approved by the Academic Board for implementation in 2017-18. A set of criteria has been agreed for the allocation of students to programme units and will be incorporated in programme guides for 2017-18. The School is monitoring the decline in the number of students being allocated their first choice of unit. Students confirmed that the role of student representatives has been clarified and that new representatives benefit from a formal induction.

7 The School has amended its Academic Regulations to ensure that external examiners for the professional undergraduate award will have access to a full range of assessed student work. The mitigating circumstances policy has been revised and communicated to staff and students. The policy now incorporates a fuller range of occurrences as required by the recommendation. A detailed and extensive Information Management and Review Policy has been approved and published. Work is continuing to fully implement the policy, which covers a wide range of internal and external published information.

8 Clear progress has been made on the three affirmations arising from the 2016 review, with the School recognising the need for some continuing development. As part of formalising the approach to staff development and review, the new Head of Teaching and Learning takes a shared responsibility with the School Director for the annual progress review meetings with staff. The School has approved a new policy for the Nomination and Appointment of External Examiners for Undergraduate and Graduate Schools. A system of annual course/unit evaluation reports has been instituted in response to the affirmation concerning the internal monitoring and review of the undergraduate programme. The first set of course/unit evaluations, for the 2015-16 academic year, is variable in its content and usefulness. This has been recognised in a rigorous review undertaken by the Teaching Committee, which has signalled the need for a revised reporting template and staff training.

9 The School adheres to the principles of fair admission and clearly aligns its admissions process to the Quality Code, *Chapter B2: Recruitment, Selection and Admission to Higher Education*. The process operates within the context of a published policy and is supported by a designated admissions team. Entry requirements are kept under regular review and enrolments are routinely monitored.

10 Clear information about admissions is provided for prospective students on the School's website. This defines programme entry requirements, including minimum English Language competency for overseas applicants. Specific entry requirements for each entry level are set out in the prospectus and in the academic regulations.

11 For undergraduate programmes, all applications are considered as part of a robust two-stage process. This involves a scrutiny of the written application and supporting evidence, including a portfolio of design work, followed by a personal on-site interview. Applicants for the graduate programmes are not required to attend an interview, but are invited to visit the School. Students met on the visit confirmed the appropriateness of advance information, as well as the high level of engagement and support offered by the School during the application and admissions cycle. The high progression and achievement rates in the School offer evidence for the rigour of the admission process.

12 The School operates two parallel sets of arrangements for the annual monitoring and review of its graduate and undergraduate programmes. Both systems involve the production of annual evaluation reports and reporting through the School's committee structure. A Quality Manual is being developed to provide a consistent reference point for all aspects of quality monitoring, but its publication date has been deferred to July 2017.

13 The monitoring arrangements for programmes within the Graduate School are well established, effective and follow the procedures laid down by The Open University as the awarding body. The detailed annual programme evaluations submitted to The Open University are produced to a standard format and include a useful set of statistical data with a covering evaluative commentary.

14 The annual course/unit evaluation reports for programmes within the Undergraduate School are new. The reports complement the existing professional monitoring, which includes a comprehensive and detailed annual submission to the Architects Registration Board. In the first version of the reporting template, which is being revised following an internal review, it is not clear how the evaluations will directly support the monitoring of academic standards.

15 Students actively contribute to quality assurance and enhancement in a variety of ways, including representation on academic committees and regular feedback surveys. Students are also represented on all key academic committees.

16 The statistical data provided with the Annual Return shows a consistently high level of retention and achievement over the three years 2013-14 to 2015-16. The School's own figures show that in 2015-16, overall retention was 95 per cent (674 of 713 students), with 97 per cent of those completing successfully achieving the end or stage qualification (653 of 674). All of the awards had a completion rate of at least 88 per cent, with some being at 100 per cent. The proportion of completing students achieving the target qualification shows a similar spread of between 88 per cent and 100 per cent.

## **Section 4: Progress in working with the external reference points to meet UK expectations for higher education**

17 The School continues to make good use of external reference points, both academic and professional. Academic Regulations are reviewed annually against the Quality Code and undergraduate programme levels are now mapped against the FHEQ. All programmes in the Undergraduate School meet the professional requirements of the Royal Institute of British Architects. The programmes also have full prescription from the Architects Registration Board until 2020. Further professional relevance is assured by the extensive involvement of practising architects in the design and delivery of taught units. Programmes within the Graduate School are awards of The Open University, whose regulations help to ensure that academic standards are monitored and that the provision is aligned to the Quality Code. The School has appointed external members to a number of its key deliberative committees, including the Teaching Committee and Academic Board.

## **Section 5: Background to the monitoring visit**

18 The monitoring visit serves as a short check on the provider's continuing management of academic standards and quality of provision. It focuses on progress since the previous review. In addition, it provides an opportunity for QAA to advise the provider of any matters that have the potential to be of particular interest in the next monitoring visit or review.

19 The monitoring visit was carried out by Ms Francine Norris, Reviewer, and Mr David Lewis, Coordinator, on 31 May 2017.

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