



Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of the Architectural Association School of Architecture, June 2015

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 commendable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision since the [previous monitoring visit](#) in May 2013.

Section 2: Changes since the last QAA monitoring visit

2 Since the last monitoring visit in 2013, the number of students at the School, adjusted to an October census date, has risen from 786 (2012-13) to 812 (2014-15). There have been no strategic changes to programmes, awarding organisations or organisational structures at the School since the 2013 monitoring visit.

Section 3: Findings from the monitoring visit

3 The School has sensibly developed the action plan from the original Review for Educational Oversight in 2012 by deleting the items that have been evaluated and signed off, continuing with items that are still being developed, and adding new items that need attention. Three examples drawn from the last two categories follow.

4 The School continues to develop its committee structure and the appointment of the new Registrar has improved communication between the Boards and Committees. The School continues to review the terms of reference and levels of delegated authority. In accordance with its governance arrangements, the School is required to account for its constitutional articles and this accounts for the measured pace of the review. Nevertheless, the key change of ensuring an enhanced role for the Academic Board is now well underway.

5 A new item introduced by the School is to develop a consolidated internal Quality Management System (QMS). Currently, the School has thorough systems for monitoring its academic activities, but these are complex as they involve satisfying the varying requirements of its three awarding bodies. The School is giving high priority to the development of a QMS that will be both streamlined and secure. It has already given thought to the principles that will govern the QMS and intends to take advantage of the fact that it is a relatively small monotechnic to simplify its quality processes.

6 Another item introduced by the School is to investigate administrative staff development. The fact that this is part of the action plan is a sign of the value that academic staff place on administrative staff, as was evidenced in discussion with the monitoring team. At present, there are opportunities for finance and computing staff and other support staff, but the School recognises that the opportunities for academic administrative staff are limited. The key role of such staff is evidenced by the references in this report to the Registrar (paragraph 4), the admissions team (paragraph 7), the Compliance Officer (paragraph 8), and the Quality Assurance Coordinator (paragraph 12). Plans are well underway to introduce internal training sessions, for which time would be allocated during the working day, and for

an annual review of administrative staff which would, among other things, identify staff development needs.

7 The admissions process is governed by a clear policy and procedures that are outlined in the School's regulations. They are widely communicated to staff and current and prospective students to ensure that all applicants are treated consistently and fairly. Applications are carefully sifted by the admissions team with checks on academic qualifications and a preliminary evaluation of the portfolio of work that each applicant is required to provide. In the case of undergraduate applicants, this leads to a decision on who is to be invited for interview, which is a necessary condition of admission. In the carefully conducted and recorded interview, both the motivation and the ability of the applicant are thoroughly probed. Students testify to the helpfulness as well as the rigour of the interview. They emphasise the great advantage of the fact that it enables them to experience at first hand the inspirational ethos of the School. In the case of unsuccessful candidates, a careful note of the reasons for rejection is recorded and the School is considering whether to supplement its brief standard rejection letters with this information, in the spirit of the Quality Code, *Chapter B2: Recruitment, Selection and Admission to Higher Education*, Indicator 8. Because of the greater experience of graduate applicants, many of whom are practising architects, a decision on their application is taken without an interview, though in practice many come to visit the School in advance.

8 In January 2015, the School appointed a Compliance Officer with responsibility for protecting the School's Tier 4 sponsor licence. In discussion with the monitoring team, School staff emphasised that this had proved to be a key and highly successful appointment. The post holder had made a major contribution to the admissions process, and had also been able to give authoritative advice to current international students.

9 The assessment processes implemented by the School are robust at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The learning outcomes are outlined clearly in the programme and course documents. The assessment design and briefs are carefully reviewed prior to the start of the academic year and mapped against the expectations of the awarding bodies. External examiners provide subject specialist oversight and their reports are now made available to the students. The external examiners commend the rigour of the summative assessment processes and the standard of the student work.

10 The 'juries', to which undergraduate students present their portfolios, constitute a striking example of the School's approach to formative assessment. They involve members of School staff, external architects and designers and other students from the School. As well as providing valuable feedback on students' progress, they engage students and staff with the profession and provide an excellent opportunity for the dissemination of good practice both in assessment and in teaching and learning. Students value the opportunity to engage in a critical appraisal of their fellow students' work. Some students thought that their engagement in this process was constrained by the presence of eminent outsiders and, in an example of initiative that exemplifies the School ethos, arranged a parallel series of 'juries' for students only.

11 The School's academic regulations contain clear statements about the importance of academic integrity, which are supported by the delivery of sessions to its students that focus on matters such as plagiarism and citation in assessed work. The small class sizes and the nature of the assessed work, a large proportion of which is portfolio-based and involves constant interaction between staff and students, enable staff to identify any issues associated with assessment misconduct.

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

12 The School has recently appointed a Quality Assurance Coordinator and together with the creation of the QAA Steering Committee this has facilitated a more systematic approach to the consideration of the Quality Code and other external benchmarks. The role of the awarding bodies and the External Advisory Group continue to prove invaluable in ensuring that Subject Benchmark Statements support curricular development.

13 The School continues to have close and productive relationships with the Architects Registration Board and the Royal Institute of British Architects, which accredit its undergraduate programmes, and with the Open University, which validates its postgraduate programmes. With the support of the Open University, the School is actively investigating the possibility of an application for degree-awarding powers.

Section 5: Background to the monitoring visit

14 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.

15 The monitoring visit was carried out by Mr Robert Jones (Coordinator) and Dr Neil Lucas (Reviewer) on 3 June 2015.

QAA1281 - R4358 - Jul 15

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2015
Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB

Tel 01452 557000
Email enquiries@qaa.ac.uk
Web www.qaa.ac.uk

Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786