



## Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of Inchbald School of Design, November 2018

### 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 Inchbald School of Design (the School) is making acceptable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision, since the May 2016 [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\)](#).

### 2 Changes since the last QAA monitoring visit

2 There have been no material changes since the previous monitoring visit although the School has recently established a separate faculty to deal with online learning. It has continued to develop its working relationship with its awarding body, Wrexham Glyndwr University (WGU), and this covers both Architectural Interior Design and Gardening Design at Certificate of HE, Diploma of HE, BA Honours and MA levels, in addition to specific Glyndwr University Certificates of Continuing Education for Interior Design and Decoration and Garden Design. Total student numbers have reduced over the past two academic years, and this has been ascribed by the School to the uncertainty faced by European students. The 2017 QAA monitoring report identified 144 registered students, and this is comparable with the current total number of students, with 24 students on WGU courses and 125 studying short courses which are offered by the School itself. This latter set of qualifications fall outside the scope of the current monitoring visit.

3 The School has a core staff team, supported by part-time and sessional staff who are also practitioners in the fields of architectural design and garden design. The workforce is experienced and well established and the current headcount of 54 staff covers seven whole time equivalent (WTE) senior managers (many of whom also have academic roles), 40 academics (11.55 WTE) and 7 WTE administrative staff.

### 3 Findings from the monitoring visit

4 The School is maintaining the academic standards and quality of learning opportunities of its provision, and has made acceptable progress against its action plan. Most actions have led to improvement in that the recommendations raised at the 2016 HER (AP) are addressed within the further adoption of systems and processes from WGU referred to in paragraph 2. Actions that still being embedded do not have the potential to put academic standards or quality at risk. These surround the signposting to the publication of the admissions policy and the linked complaints and appeals policy externally, and the further development of student representation and communication arrangements. (paragraphs 8 and 11) Since the previous annual monitoring visit, the School has developed mechanisms for action planning (paragraph 5) and monitors these through revised committee structures. Minutes indicate that matters that arise from the action plans are discussed at meetings, including those attended by student representatives (paragraph 8). Core members of the School sit on all committees, ensuring that issues are not overlooked.

5 The School's approach to action planning enables it to draw out areas of continued good practice. As such, the School continues to offer highly personalised teaching that students consider a major feature of their experience. Similarly, the live project briefs are evident in student work and remain a core element of the curriculum. Students also appreciate the engagement with professionals who deliver key sessions on the programmes. Staff carefully organise the timetable to maximise student engagement with these specialised contributors.

6 While the School is a small provider, it still maintains its commitment to support students with strong pastoral care. Students are clear that they can access pastoral support on request. There are opportunities for financial support through career development loans, and for international students advice on accommodation is made available. Where students have stated learning disabilities, the School makes reasonable adjustments and offers support. More critically, the support surrounding the preparation for employment remains embedded in the curriculum, with staff and students describing the programme as an intensive preparation for the realities of a deadline driven project-based industry.

7 With the Wrexham Glyndwr University partnership now fully operational, all course documents ensure that students have full programme descriptors and academic procedures. The School's own student handbook provides further iteration of these matters within a school context.

8 The School considers the process of student feedback as ongoing but has made acceptable progress in this regard. There is a student representative system, with representatives attending one committee and a student voice forum, both of which are advisory committees. Student representatives do not sit on any of the School's standing committees. Those students that the review team met did not describe any training they had received for the role of student representative, although it was noted that it was still relatively early in the term and elections had only just taken place.

9 The School seeks external academic and professional advice in the development of all its programmes. This is part of its requirements as a partner of the University. Students affirm that the input of external professional contacts remains one of the School's main strengths.

10 The School uploads its external examiners' reports to an online server, to which all students have access. The School recognises that it needs to continue to make the link between the reports and the improvements it makes to the programmes in any given year. All programmes for the University have external examiners as a requirement of validation.

11 The School defers to the University for its admissions process and policy, and is working closely with the University to further improve the sign-posting of the online availability of this documentation, and the related complaints and appeals process. The School's website currently provides general information about its admissions processes and it sends students a very helpful admissions pack. Some students the review team met question the speed of the return of application decisions, but the School highlights the need to robustly check and confirm externally prior to formal acceptance, which can result in some delays.

12 Students confirm that the information they receive about the programme is full and exact, with many citing employers as the initial source of information about the School, indicating its standing within the profession. During the 90-minute interview process, staff explain the programme in detail including, if necessary, any requirements for the recognition of prior learning. As with all such policies, recognition of prior learning regulations are those of the University and are strictly applied. The University requires students who speak English

as a second language to pass an English language competency test with an IELTS grade of 6.0 or higher. Students confirm this test is rigorously applied.

13 The School's assessment practices follow the policies and procedures of the University. External examiners consider the School's assessment procedures and documentation to be fair and detailed. The process of assessment tracks through from reports by studio tutors, through the moderation of the Course Director, to the verification and moderation of the external examiner. This continues the good practice previously noted. The University accepts the grades of the School's Internal Examination Board and takes them through to its own progression and exam boards. Although the School's vertical teaching practice is particular to the studio approach, the University regards this as an innovation within its own practice and welcomes it.

14 As the students produce design work in the studios, there are limited issues about authorship. Furthermore, staff and student engagement throughout the evolution of the design process, along with proprietary plagiarism-detection software for written assignments, maintains academic integrity. The process of discussion and the evidencing of how a design has come into being rigorously ensure that design concepts are not plagiarised or if ideas are borrowed, they are referenced.

15 The professional focus of the programmes has an impact on assessment. The students (who at the time of the visit are in the initial stages of study) feel the pressure of study but recognise that 'being thrown in at the deep end' (with support) is a valid learning experience. This is the reason many choose to study at the School, simulating as it does the highly pressurised professional environment for which they are studying to work in. Assessment feedback is clear, detailed and its delineation of feedback against criteria is meticulous.

16 The School has seen its recruitment fall by 20 per cent over each of the last two years. The School is again able to recruit students with a tier 4 visa and awaits the outcomes of the UK's withdrawal from the European Union to determine how that will affect applications. Europe has historically been a strong recruitment ground for the School and while there has been a decline in studio-based EU students, the School's online recruitment has grown.

17 The School's success rates reflect the nature of the provision, and for 2017-18, all 20 students completing a WGU programme passed their qualification. The equivalent figure for 2016-17 was 21 of 22, or 95.45 per cent. Those students that met the review team were highly motivated, articulate about their work and their determination to succeed.

18 The School retains students through to completion on courses, but if students do leave it is usually because of ill-health or family reasons. None of these factors were evident on the WGU courses in relation to the 2017-18 cohort, and of 22 students, 20 have completed their provision, with the remaining two shown as continuing, giving an actual retention rate to date of 91 per cent, with a potential of 100 per cent. The equivalent figure for 2016-17 is 21 of 22, or 95.45 per cent. The School has small cohorts, so this can have a disproportionate statistical effect on data. However, if students do not progress from one programme to the other, it is usually because of successful employment. Students affirm that they have all enrolled with the intent of progressing from a pre-entry course to either a bachelors or master's programme. Deferrals are under the remit of the University, although the School addresses localised matters, such as minor absences.

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

19 The provider demonstrates appropriate engagement with relevant external reference points, including the Quality Code. In line with the requirements of its awarding university, the School's programmes must align with the UK Quality Code, the FHEQ and relevant Subject Benchmark Statements. University programmes set out learning outcomes that align with the FHEQ, while external examiner reports indicate that student assessment measures their attainment of those outcomes.

20 There is no Subject Benchmark Statement for interior design, but the School does make reference to those for Architecture and for Art and Design. It also draws on the British Institute of Interior Design competencies and benefits from the support of the many professionals who work with the School.

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

21 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.

22 The monitoring visit was carried out by Mr Mark Langley, Reviewer, and Mrs Roshani Swift, QAA Officer, on 13 November 2018.

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