

Royal Institute of British Architects

**Report of the RIBA Visiting Board
to the Architectural Association**

Confirmed by the RIBA Education Committee 4 June 2008

**The Architectural Association School of
Architecture**

Part One: The AA Intermediate Examination

Part Two: The AA Final Examination

**Part Three: The AA Professional Practice &
Practical Experience Examination**

Date of Visiting Board: 15 - 16 February 2007

1. Information About the Courses

1.1 Courses offered for validation

Part One: The AA Intermediate Examination (three years full-time)

Part Two: The AA Final Examination (two years full-time)

Part Three: The AA Professional Practice & Practical Experience Examination

1.2 Address of the Institution where the course is delivered

Architectural Association

School of Architecture

36 Bedford Square

London

WC1B 3ES

Tel: 020 7887 4000

Fax: 020 7414 0782

W: www.aaschool.ac.uk

1.3 Name of Awarding Body

The Architectural Association

1.4 Name of Director

Brett Steele

2. Membership of the Visiting Board

2.1 The members of the RIBA Visiting Board for the visit on Thursday 15 and Friday 16 February 2007 were:

Robert Hutson (Chair)

Professor Martin Symes

Erejuwa Duncan

Robert Giddings

Mark Way

Hilary Lade (Non Architect Member)

Tina Frost (Regional Representative)

Negar Mihanyar (Student Member)

Stephanie Beasley-Suffolk (RIBA Validation Coordinator) was in attendance as Secretary to the Board.

Louise Cox (UIA First Vice-President) attended the Board as an observer.

3. Procedures & Criteria for the Visit

3.1 The Visiting Board was carried out under the "RIBA Procedures for the Validation of UK Courses and Examinations in Architecture", published Sept 2003, effective from September 2003 (as amended at RIBA Validation Committee 19.05.2005), the "RIBA Criteria for Validation", published March 2002, effective from September 2003, and the RIBA Descriptions and Regulations for the Recognition of Courses and Examinations in Professional Practice & Management, (Part Three), published November 2003.

For more information see www.architecture.com.

4. Recommendations of the Visiting Board

4.1 At its meeting on 4 June 2008, the RIBA Education Committee confirmed:

Continued Validation of:

Part One: The Architectural Association Intermediate Examination (three years full-time)

Part Two: The Architectural Association Final Examination (two years full-time)

Part Three: The Architectural Association Professional Practice & Practical Experience Examination.

4.2 The next full Visiting Board should take place in 2011.

5. Recommendation of the Visiting Board to the Commonwealth Association of Architects, the Construction Industry Council & the EU Directive

5.1 The Visiting Board recommends to the Commonwealth Association of Architects that the CAA continue with their accreditation of the Part One and Part Two qualifications.

5.2 The Visiting Board was satisfied that the Part One and Part Two courses met the Construction Industry Council Common Learning Outcomes for Degree Courses in the Built Environment.

5.3 The Visiting Board recommends to the ARB that the Part One and Part Two courses together met all points of the EU Directive.

6. Criteria for Validation

6.1 On the basis of the academic portfolios examined, the Visiting Board was satisfied that all graduates from all the courses listed in 4.1 satisfied all the Criteria for Validation (which are held in common by the RIBA for validation and the ARB for prescription).

7. Standards

7.1 A range of work from the previous year of the courses listed in 4.1 above was inspected during the visit and was found to meet the required standards.

8. Standard Requirements of Recognition

8.1 RIBA recognition of all courses/qualifications is dependent upon:

- i. external examiners being appointed for the course;
- ii. any significant changes to the course being submitted to the RIBA;
- iii. any change of award title, and the effective date of the change, being reported to the RIBA so that, where appropriate, recognition may formally be transferred to the new title by the RIBA;
- iv. submission to the RIBA of the names of students passing the courses listed in 4.1 and 4.2.

9. Summary of the Recommendations, Advice & Commentary Contained in the Full Report

9.1 The Architectural Association School is a unique institution which aims to offer a breadth and depth of experience which allows students to explore, experiment and specialise according to their own interests. This ethos extends to its research activities which are expanding rapidly. It attracts a huge variety of exceptionally qualified, enthusiastic staff, who, with their students, foster a creative and energetic community. The School is investing heavily in facilities in support of this. Its extensive range of public events and its central location help make architecture accessible to a very wide audience. The Board encourages the School to continue to scrutinise its activities to ensure that its ambition of variety and depth in its academic programmes are achieved to the level to which it aspires. All the subsequent observations should be seen in the context of the Architectural Association School providing an excellent academic environment for the study of architecture.

9.2 Specific strengths of the School included:

- Articulate, passionate, energetic, involved and committed staff.
- The impressive diversity of staff and students bringing the obvious benefits of a wide range of experiences and influences.
- An articulate, passionate and engaged student community.
- Pride in the School evinced by the staff and students.

- The exceptional contribution of the Academic Registrar and her staff.
- Fantastic facilities.
- The wonderful model-making culture.
- The exploration of different kinds of materials is particularly noteworthy.
- The concerted effort made by the School to provide space in a difficult location.
- The acquisition of Hooke Park and the School's plans for this site.
- An excellent staff-student ratio.
- Excellent staff-student relationships in which support is mutual.
- Communications between different year groups.
- The wide range of events organised and hosted by the School.
- Its central London location.
- The open jury system.
- The range of site visits across the world.
- The first year studio is a welcome and promising development.
- Links with advanced practice and other institutions.

9.3 Recommendations

9.3.1 The Board has made the following recommendation to the School. The RIBA expects the Institution to report on action taken or planned as a result of the recommendations in the annual monitoring returns submitted by the School and in the mid term review. Failure by an Institution to act on the recommendation, or provide the RIBA with a clear rationale for not doing so,

may result in a course being conditioned by a future Visiting Board.

- 9.3.2 The Board recommends that the School ensures that students continue to be aware of the criteria required for Part One and Part Two. The School should ensure that, within its processes, achievement of these criteria can continue to be demonstrated, particularly the requirement to demonstrate coherent architectural designs. The Board notes that there are processes already in place which give the Board confidence that this will continue to be so.

9.4 **Advice**

- 9.4.1 The Visiting Board offers the following advice to the Institution on desirable, but not essential improvements, which it is felt would assist course developments and/or raise standards:
- 9.4.2 The Board advises the School to monitor and analyse the variations in the pass rate at Part Three.

10. Summary of Previous Visiting Board Reports

- 10.1 The last full Visit to the Architectural Association School of Architecture took place on 7 and 8 March 2002
- The 2002 Visiting Board recommended:
Continued Validation of
Part One: Architectural Association Intermediate Examination (three years full-time)
Part Two: Architectural Association Final Examination (two years full-time)

Part Three: Architectural Association Professional Practice and Practical Experience Examination

- 10.2 Summary of the Previous Visiting Board Report
The 2002 Visiting Board report included the following statements:

“The visit has shown the Architectural Association School to be continuing to look forward and to reinvent itself in the most nimble and responsive fashion. The Board is confident that the model of educational practice being developed by the AA has the potential to continue to enrich architectural education and the profession in the UK and internationally.”

“The School is fortunate in possessing an incredibly able, truly international team of academic staff. The Board had the highest praise for the way the staff at all levels responded to the Board’s questions during the visit. The academic staff and students are supported by an exceedingly able, dedicated and caring team of support staff.”

“The Board noted the increased evidence since the last visit of cross-fertilisation of work across intermediate and diploma units. The continued expansion of graduate programmes and the resulting interaction particularly with the diploma programme has further enhanced the experience of AA students. The student experience is also greatly enriched by the extensive programme of public lectures, the exhibitions organised by the AA and a wide range of publications.”

“The Board would recommend that the School reconsiders the mechanisms via which it obtains feedback

from its External Examiners. Separate Chief Examiners for Part 1 and Part 2 might allow more detailed and focused reports. If the External Examiners are not to write independent reports, the role of Chief Examiner might be rotated. A formal written report should be produced by the Part 3 Examiners."

"The Board would recommend, however, that the School re-examine its work in the area of environmental design in both Part 1 and Part 2. The Board saw evidence of real commitment to this area in terms of the development of new courses and the usage being made of Hooke Park. The School is encouraged, however, to explore approaches, appropriate to its overall methodology, to ensure that the students' level of engagement with environmental design match those seen in the structures and materials areas."

"The School may wish to review the operation of the "work shadowing" scheme operating in the Intermediate School. It was clear to the Board from discussions with the students that they were less than fully engaged with this activity."

11. Commentary

11.1 Self-Appraisal and Developments since the Last Visit

The Board considered the School's Critical Self-Appraisal somewhat bland and lacking in self-criticism. It did not revisit the recommendations of the last Visiting Board thoroughly and there was no clear evidence of student involvement in its drafting. However, the Board learned of students' involvement in the preparation of this document and that a special meeting was organised by the Director of the School with a group of students representing all

parts of the school to discuss the draft document. The Board was not able to gain an appreciation of any vision for the School's future direction and development.

The main developments to the School and programmes since the last Visiting Board reported in the School's Critical Self Appraisal include:

- The appointment of a new director. The election process provided an opportunity for the School to engage in debate about every aspect of its activities.
- a change in the structure of the first year of the Part One course from a unitised course to a year studio-based course.
- Continued introduction of new units to both Part One and Part Two as a balance to many long running and well-established units.
- Complementary studies courses have continued to be developed in both the Part One and Part Two courses. Specifically, Media Studies was reorganised in 2005 and now offers a broader range of experience than in previous years. In response to the 2002 Visiting Board report, Technical Studies now includes more environmental courses whilst retaining the strong coverage of structural issues. History and Theory Studies now includes a broader range of elective courses in the Part Two programme alongside a more coordinated consolidated sequence at Part One level.
- As a response to the 2002 Visiting Board report, professional, legal and practice related teaching has been enhanced for both third year Part One and fifth year Part Two students. Students now get a detailed induction into the School's PEDR

monitoring programme for both year-out and stage two professional experience.

- The fifth year Future Studies course has expanded to include a series of visiting lectures by leading professionals. This is one of a range of initiatives seeking to strengthen the School's link to the profession.
- Following its own internal evaluation in 2003, the School has created optional elective computing courses available to all undergraduate students
- In 2005 the new Director of the School launched the creation of an entirely new infrastructure of optional learning activities based around four new Research Clusters. The activities take the form of visiting workshops, conferences, roundtable discussions and the production of publications, all with the aim of bringing students together outside their courses and units for short-term forms of interaction and learning.
- Enhancement of facilities at Bedford Square and adjacent properties.
- The AA has completed the acquisition of Hooke Park in Dorset and subsequently secured funds to ensure its development.

There is no indication as yet as to how the introduction of top-up fees in the UK public higher education sector will affect recruitment to the AA's courses.

11.2 Documentation and Arrangements for the Visit

The Board would like to thank the staff and students for their marvellous hospitality during the visit. All practical arrangements were excellent. The academic staff and school management were particularly helpful and the Board was impressed to see the wide advertising of the

Visit throughout the School and the encouragement of students to participate in the meetings. The School engaged with the Visit as a positive experience.

The documentation received in advance of the Board covered all the requirements set out in the RIBA Validation Procedures. All documentation was helpful; in particular the Board found the Student handbooks and Working in Practice handbooks excellent.

The portfolios were clearly laid out and labelled.

11.2.1 Record of Academic portfolios sampled

AA Intermediate Examination (Part One)

Year 1: 3 lowest pass, 2 middle and 2 high pass (from a cohort of 51)

Year 3: the lowest pass portfolios from each of 9 units plus 2 middle and 2 high pass portfolios (from a cohort of 54 – 58 including fails) The year 3 portfolios included work from year 2 of the course.

AA Final Examination (Part Two):

Year 5: the lowest pass portfolios from each of 16 units plus 2 middle and 2 high pass portfolios (from a cohort of 63; 75 including fails and withdrawals before examination) The year 5 portfolios included work from year 4 of the course.

AA Professional Practice & Practical Experience Examination (Part Three)

For Part Three, the Board examined the complete assessed work of 3 lowest pass, 2 middle pass and 2 high pass candidates from the most recent cohort: Autumn 2006. (21 passed from a cohort of 30.)

11.3 Responses made to the previous Visiting Board report (and to reports of any revisits) and external examiner comments.

Section 11.1 sets out a number of changes to the course structures and contents made as a result of either the 2002 Visiting Board report, the School's internal review in 2003 or external examiner's reports.

The School has adopted the 2002 Board's recommendations about the appointment of separate Part One and Part Two External Examiners and improved feedback mechanisms. The Chief External Examiner writes a report at the end of the examination session.

Although the School has taken steps to address the recommendation regarding environmental design, the Board did not see a great deal of evidence in the students' work. The condition regarding the lack of coherent architectural designs also applies here. The Board believes that the School needs to continue trying to engage all the students, in particular making them aware of the RIBA/ARB Criteria.

It emerged in the 2007 Board's conversations with the School that the term 'work shadowing' in the 2002 report was unclear but was understood to refer to the students' preparation for practice. The 2007 Board commends the steps the School has taken to improve students' preparation for practice. The Board believes that 'Preparation for Part Three' is an exemplary document. This is clearly one of the strengths of the School. Previously students had been able to take 'years out' at

various points, for example after Year 1 or Year 2, but this practice is disappearing.

The External Examiners confirmed in their meeting with the Board that the School responds appropriately to recommendations made in their reports.

11.4 Context of the validated courses within the wider provision of the School

The AA School is unique in the UK operating outside the government funded university structure and almost entirely supported by student fees. The Architectural Association is legally administered by a Council comprising 18 leading UK architects, thus providing it and the AA School with a clear link to the profession. The 18 AA Council Members are the legal trustees of the AA School. The AA Foundation has the role of administering, investing and awarding scholarships for AA students. In addition the AA School assists a further number of students via scholarships, bursaries, student prizes and assistantships. The AA estimates that approximately one in six students at the AA receive some form of financial assistance to help them meet tuition fees.

In addition to three validated and prescribed Architectural Association qualifications, the School also offers a number of specialist postgraduate programmes validated by the Open University. These include:

- Landscape Urbanism MA
- Histories & Theories MA
- Housing & Urbanism MA
- Sustainable Environmental Design MSc/MArch
- Architecture & Urbanism MArch
- Emergent Technologies & Design MSc/MArch

The School also offers MPhil and PhD research degrees via its link with the Open University Research School.

11.5 Detailed Commentary on the Part One course: AA Intermediate Examination

11.5.1 *Clarity, validity and achievement of course objectives*

The Board found that the Part One course is moving towards clarity. At present there appears to be a conflict between a clear structure and progression and the idea of a voyage of discovery. However, it was noted that the School does not want to curb the students' creativity by introducing objectives that might be prescriptive.

11.5.2 *Course design and content*

Since the last Visiting Board the first year has moved from a unit-structure to a single studio system, starting with short, rotating projects and building up to more complex ones. This is intended to give a broad introduction to architecture and prepare students for the Intermediate School (second and third year).

The Intermediate School is run on a unit system and second and third year students are taught together. Each unit is led by a 'Unit Master'. The normal group size is approximately 12 students. There are presently ten units (9 active at the time of the visit) covering a wide variety of issues. Unit masters introduce their units in a series of presentations at the beginning of the academic year. Students choose three units in order of preference and are interviewed, with portfolios, by the relevant masters or tutors who then select students.

Design units are supported by the Complementary Studies Programme which comprises taught courses in History and Theory, Technical Studies and Media Studies. Although these studies are intended to support the design unit work, students must also make separate submissions for assessment. The Board felt that the procedures for assessment and feedback operated to different philosophies in the design units and the complementary studies; this felt to Board members like two cultures running in parallel.

Students may only change units during an academic year in exceptional circumstances. However, they are encouraged to switch units between their second and third year to gain as much contrast and breadth of experience as possible. Students rarely choose to stay in one unit.

The Board observed that there was a surprising similarity of approach amongst the units' contents, despite the stated ideology. The Board was very impressed with the Complementary Studies programmes which are supported by clear briefs and feedback. Units are reviewed annually.

The Board agreed that the restructuring of the First Year had had a positive impact on the programme and had resulted in some very promising work.

11.5.3 *Quality and coverage of the syllabus (including balance and integration between design/non-design work)*

- *Design*

The Board was satisfied that all the Part One Validation Criteria in the area of Design were being met by all graduates from the AA Intermediate Examination.

The design process was fully investigated, applied to a wide variety of different contexts and evidenced in the student work. This was perhaps at the expense of clear outcomes. The Board recommends that the School ensures that students continue to be aware of the criteria required for Part One. The School should ensure that, within its processes, achievement of these criteria can continue to be demonstrated, particularly the requirement to demonstrate coherent architectural designs. The Board notes that there are processes already in place which give the Board confidence that this will continue to be so.

- *Technology & Environment*

The Board was satisfied that all the Part One Validation Criteria in the area of Technology & Environment were being met by all graduates from the AA Intermediate Examination.

The Board was impressed with the amount of investigation using models undertaken by the students. However, the Board would encourage more integration of technological and environmental studies with design work.

- *Cultural Context*

The Board was satisfied that all Validation Criteria in the area of Cultural Context were being met by all graduates from the AA Intermediate Examination.

The Board commends the School on its coverage of these areas, which were extensive and even exhaustive. In particular, the Board commends the first year studio work. The Board encourages the School to continue in this vein.

- *Communication*

The Board was satisfied that all Part One Validation Criteria in the area of Communication were being met by all graduates from the AA Intermediate Examination.

The School does not promote any dogma relating to hand drawing or CAD techniques; students are able to use whatever media they wish. The Board found that the students demonstrate excellent technique using a very wide range of media. Skills are well-developed. The Board particularly notes the extensive use of modelling. In both speech and writing the students are highly articulate.

Opportunities for learning the details of computer systems are excellent and enable students to acquire a very high level of competence. However, the Board would like to see more use made of IT as a means to an end and not an end in itself.

- *Management Practice & Law*

The Board was satisfied that all the Part One Validation Criteria in the area of Management Practice & Law were being met by all graduates from the AA Intermediate Examination.

This is delivered through taught courses as one of the Complementary Studies. Students appear self-assured and confident and are able to find appropriate work.

- *Preparation for Professional Experience*

The School tries to encourage a year out after the third year. Students may technically take a year out after any year of the course but this practice is declining. The School produces an excellent handbook 'Working out in architecture: a Student Guide to Getting a Job and Getting

the Best Out of Work Experience.’ Students register with the Professional Practice Co-ordinator and sign up to the PEDR website. If they wish students can meet the Professional Practice Adviser during their year out for advice and appraisal. This is currently a voluntary system but will be mandatory for both Part One and Part Two from the 2007/2008 academic session. The School is exploring practice related initiatives in one of its new research clusters which commenced in the 2005/2006 Academic Year.

11.5.4 *Progression within the course*

Completion rates are affected by the internal assessment system which recommends whether students are ready to present for examination. The School has taken steps to address non-completion rates at Part One. Student progress is tracked and monitored and drop-out rates have fallen.

11.5.5 *Assessment*

Students’ work is assessed by a variety of methods including submitted essays, design projects, workshops, groups projects and presentations. All lectures and juries are open events. End of year assessments are made by a group of tutors on rotational basis, so that all students’ work will eventually have been seen by as wide a variety as possible.

The assessment, and the recording of it, in complementary studies areas was excellent. Course work is graded according to broad bands. There was, however, a lack of clarity in the assessment of unit work. The Board would like to see more transparency and clarity in the continual assessment of student achievement against the unit criteria throughout the academic year.

Failure rates have been relatively high but are falling. Students are scored on pass/incomplete/fail basis and various review and repeat processes are triggered depending on the outcome of the assessment.

Compensation is not permitted. Students must pass all courses in the First, Second and Third Year before being permitted to present for the AA Intermediate Examination. In addition, students must be assessed by the Intermediate School Final Check before being permitted to present their work to the External Examiners for consideration for Part One exemption. The process of asking students to take a year out or to rework projects outside the School if they failed at the end of the year is still active for Part 1 students (3rd Year) but has been discontinued for Part 2 students (5th Year).

Students who pass the AA Intermediate Final Check present their portfolios to the External Examiners who judge whether the students have met the Part One RIBA/ARB criteria. There is no appeals procedure at this point.

The School tries to make the students aware of support systems in case of difficulty. Students receive written feedback throughout the academic year through submission at progress reviews, previews, internal juries, open juries and at the end of the year. The post of Academic Head has recently been formalised; one aspect of this role is to provide an additional means of addressing the concerns and progress of individual students.

11.5.6 *Admissions and arrangements for direct entry at a stage other than the start of the course*

A recent decline in the intake to the first year appears to have been reversed, with a larger number being admitted in 2006/2007. The School is confident that this upward swing will be maintained. The present first year intake was 54, compared with 36 previously. The School is intentionally increasing the intake at Part One to make the balance in the School healthier.

New admissions procedures are being introduced for the 2007/2008 academic session.

Academic and administrative staff are involved in all stages of the process. Students must fulfil specific requirements at GCSE and A level or their recognised international equivalent. The School's own Foundation Course is accepted as the equivalent of an Art A Level. Applicants for both Parts One and Two must submit a portfolio and attendant application documentation which is considered by an Application Panel, consisting of Unit Masters from Part One (or Part Two, as appropriate) and the Admissions Co-ordinator. The Director or Academic Head may also be consulted. Those successful at this stage are passed to the Interview Panel. The Part One interview panel includes not only unit masters, but also the Admissions Co-ordinator and a student from the Intermediate School. In assessing a candidate's suitability, the Panel also determines the progress towards meeting the RIBA/ARB criteria. A successful candidate may be placed in any year of the programme (except Fifth) as the Panel deems appropriate. Candidates may also be advised to carry out further work before reapplying.

Some applicants for the AA Part Two who have already gained a Part One from another school, particularly one

outside the UK, might be invited to undertake the third year of the AA Part One before progressing to Part Two. Numbers of direct entrants into year three appear very large for this reason.

11.6 Detailed Commentary on the Part Two course: AA Final Examination

11.6.1 Clarity, validity and achievement of course objectives

The Board believed that the clarity of the Part Two programme could be improved by emphasising to Part Two students the particular requirement that "students produce and demonstrate coherent and well-resolved architectural designs."

11.6.2 Course design and content

The Board considered that the unit system was very good. 12 Units are presently offered at Part Two. As at Intermediate level, students apply to units in order of preference. The majority apparently are accepted into their first choice, but it can be very disappointing if this does not happen. Fourth and fifth years are taught together. Most students change units between fourth and fifth year. However, if they have begun an area of investigation in one unit that is deemed to be of value they may apply to stay in the same unit for a second year.

Tutors are inspirational and of a very high quality. The Board considered that the failure rate of new units was rather high, and believes that consideration needs to be given to the process via which new units offered by new members of staff are established and the levels of support offered to them.

11.6.3 *Quality and coverage of the syllabus (including balance and integration between design/ non-design work)*

- *Design*

The Board was satisfied that all the Part Two Validation Criteria in the area of Design were being met by all of the graduates from the AA Final Examination.

. The Board found that the follow-through from technical and cultural work into architectural design was sometimes inconsistent.

The Board found that in some units there was a great deal of evidence of process, leading to little product. The Board refers the School to the Part Two criterion that students demonstrate ‘the ability to generate and systematically test, analyse and appraise design options, and draw conclusions which display methodological and theoretical rigour.’

- *Technology & Environment*

The Board was satisfied that all Part Two Validation Criteria in the area of Technology & Environment were being met by all of the graduates from the AA Final Examination.

There is a great deal of exploration of this area. The Board found, however, that this was not consistently integrated into design and encourages the School to address this.

- *Cultural Context*

The Board was satisfied that all Validation Criteria in the area of Cultural Context were being met by all of the graduates from the AA Final Examination.

This area of the course was much stronger. There is a great deal of interest in and enthusiasm for theory and philosophy in the School which is demonstrated in the students’ work.

- *Communication*

The Board was satisfied that all Part Two Validation Criteria in the area of Communication were being met by all of the graduates from the AA Final Examination.

The range of media employed was extraordinary; in particular, the students’ sophisticated use of IT. Moreover, students knew how to control it.

The Board learned of the opportunities for developing teamworking skills achieved in part through the activities organised at Hook Park.

It was claimed that to avoid units working in isolation to differing standards, interactions between units is required in the form of combined tutorials, open juries, research clusters and internal juries; the Board saw little evidence of this and the interaction appeared to be informal.

- *Management Practice & Law*

The Board was satisfied that all the Part Two Validation Criteria in the area of Management Practice & Law were being met by all of the graduates from the AA Final Examination.

This is adequately covered in a taught course.

11.6.4 *Progression within the course*

Since the last Visiting Board the School has been experimenting with different approaches to accommodating students who fail their Part Two and are required to repeat the year. One model tried was for students to repeat the year as "external" working outside the units, but this proved less than ideal. In 2004/5 the School created a separate "Unit X" which brought all repeat students together. The School recognises with hindsight that grouping weaker students together and denying them the opportunity to learn from the more able students was also not ideal. The current approach is to guarantee repeat students a place within one of their top three choices of unit. Initial response to this approach has been positive, but the School will continue to monitor and evaluate what they see as a key academic process.

The Board found that progression is very good, with many students completing the programme (including Part One) in five years.

11.6.5 *Assessment*

Assessment is carried out by the same range of methods used at Part One.

Students who are recommended to present their Portfolios for Part Two are assessed by the External Examiners who judge whether the students have met the Part Two RIBA/ARB criteria and therefore should receive Exemption. As at Part One, there is no appeals procedure at this point. The conferment of the AA Diploma is determined by a separate internal process. Awarding of the Diploma by itself does not carry exemption.

The Board believed that transparency of assessment could be improved. As at Part One, complementary studies course work is graded in broad bands. At the final portfolio review there is a pass/fail system. Students do not appear to be aware that there is the possibility of the award of an AA Diploma without the Part Two linked "Final Examination". The Board's concern particularly focuses on this issue and the transparency and clarity in the assessment of unit work. It is noted that the Prospectus and Student Handbook states that assessment is by two different bodies, i.e. Diploma Committee and External Examiners for two qualifications and by a meeting held with 5th Year students at the beginning of the academic year in which the whole process is explained.

11.6.6 Admissions and arrangements for direct entry at a stage other than the start of the course

Admissions procedures are very clear and well-managed. The School attracts exceptionally able and committed candidates, all of whom are required to present themselves for interview with their portfolio. The School operates strict entry criteria; applicants with a low pass from the AA intermediate school might not be permitted to enter year four and could be required to undertake extra work. The entry process is identical to that for Part One, although specific requirements are necessarily different. Applicants who have gained Part 1 at a UK university must have achieved at least a 2.2. Some applicants who have already gained a Part One from another school, particularly one outside the UK, might be invited to undertake year three again at the AA before progressing to Part Two. Students do not appear to be concerned that they might be required to do this.

**11.7 Detailed Commentary on the Part Three course:
AA Professional Practice & Practical Experience
Examination**

11.7.1 The course design and content were very clear. This is a unique course in its intensity and brevity. Part Three is short and intensive, and run twice a year which helps to make it very popular. There are approximately 24 students per intake.

It is well thought out and well organised, providing a good range of seminars. Candidates may take the course two or three times before presenting for examination; this is because they benefit personally from the course and it helps them to determine whether they are ready to sit the examination or not.

11.7.2 The Board was satisfied that the work of the autumn 2006 cohort which it examined clearly demonstrated that the Part Three Validation Criteria were being met by all graduates from the course and that minimum pass standards were being set appropriately.

11.7.3 However, the Board was concerned about the greatly fluctuating, sometimes very high failure rates at Part Three. In recent years the pass rate jumped from 44% in 2003 to 70% in 2006. The Board advises the School to monitor this carefully. The Board noted that it is the students' choice whether they present or not and that the School encourages them not to do so before they have spent three years in practice. In the light of this, the Board

found the discrepancies in pass rates over the last few years surprising.

11.7.4 Assessment is holistic and is based to a great extent on formal written examination. However candidates appear to be content with this. If a student fails Part Three, they are required to undertake the entire written component of the examination again. It is possible to have a deferred pass during which time they can produce more evidence of work experience. They are then interviewed by the chief examiner and the Professional Studies Adviser.

There is no formal marking system; the examiners' remit is to determine the candidates' competence. During the Professional Interview, the examiners examine in more depth areas identified as weak in the written papers. Examiners analyse exam question avoidance and focus interviews accordingly. Each student's body of work is independently marked by two examiners. Candidates receive written feedback from the pairs of examiners which identifies areas in which candidates will need to improve their performance; however, they are not told why they have failed. Appeals may be made only on the grounds of maladministration.

The variations in pass rates have been discussed but no conclusion have been reached. Length of study is often not relevant as candidates often attend the series of seminars twice; however the level of preparedness and the appropriateness of the practice in which candidates have been employed are probably significant. Examiners make every effort to ensure consistency in the examination. Questions are written collaboratively and papers are reviewed whenever results appear to be particularly unusual. The Examiners try to bring the breadth of their

own experience to the examination to make it as wide-ranging as possible within the requirements of the criteria. Scenarios are intended to reflect reality; however the Board thought the style could be somewhat dense.

11.7.5 The panel of examiners is appointed each year and length of service is typically 4-6 years.

11.7.6 Admissions processes are entirely appropriate.

11.8 External examining arrangements

The Board was able to meet many of the School's current External Examiners for the Part One and Part Two programmes and held a separate meeting with the Part Three External Examiner and Professional Examiners.

The effort and intensity put into this system is very good. However, the Board believes that the formal processes need to be clarified, particularly with regard to meeting the criteria. The Board learnt from its meeting with the Director that procedures are due to be tightened for the 2007 examination session. The Board believes that particular care needs to be taken in inducting overseas External Examiners to ensure that they are fully conversant with the RIBA/ARB validation criteria.

External Examiners are typically appointed for four years to provide continuity. Their chief remit is to determine whether the portfolios meet the RIBA/ARB jointly-held criteria. Their role is help the School assess itself, work with students and unit masters bringing their own experience to bear on the proceedings. Examiners look at work from the point of view of practice, whether the student is ready for practice and how their work compares with that at other schools. Their remit has been extended

since the last visit to cover formal examination of all Complementary Studies Work. The pool of examiners has also been increased; pairs of examiners are assigned to each unit and there is a 'floating' examiner.

The Examiners confirmed that the AA was an adaptable School that did respond to suggestions, for example, that students should present their own work. The process of response has now been formalised. External examiners have a formal meeting with all unit masters for feedback, and the final written report is circulated and sent to the Director.

Following earlier comments in their reports, the Examiners believe that students are made aware of assessment procedures earlier than previously and appear to be well prepared. Processes are more transparent; students are more aware of other units. There is greater parity of experience and it is not possible for weaker units to survive.

Students' work is assessed firstly by the School and then by External Examiners. External examiners, examine in pairs, and see all work of all students inclusive of the complementary studies submissions/grades. and have the power to pass or fail students. RIBA exemption and the conferment of the AA Diploma are independent. External examiners are concerned only with RIBA exemption. It is possible to be awarded AA Final Examination (Part Two) but not the AA Diploma and vice-versa. This occurs occasionally.

There appeared to be some inconsistency in the different parties' understanding of what was being looked at; the School said that borderline passes were referred to the

External Examiners, whereas the Examiners themselves thought they were looking at clear passes. The Board noted that it is normal practice for external examiners at an institution to see all marks, including the fails. Under the present system the External Examiners are given a written summary of submissions/assessment marking and the internal portfolio assessment as to whether the School has determined the portfolio has acquired a Pass or Borderline standard. External Examiners do have the authority to independently determine the assessment of any student's portfolio, i.e. External Examiners can therefore change the internal decision.

When Externals interview students their tutors are present, but are not allowed to speak. The Examiners saw this as a very open system which put the teachers under scrutiny too, showing and questioning the pedagogy. The Board however, did not think that this was good practice.

Students who have failed the internal assessment of the AA Intermediate or Final Examination are unable to take their portfolios to the External Examiners.

11.9 **Arrangements for Monitoring Professional Experience**

Previously there were no formal courses for year out students, resulting in reports that they felt ill-prepared. The School has now introduced formal courses in the third and fifth year, supported by a very good handbook. Many more students now wish to do five years of academic study without a year-out. The School is trying to encourage much more informal relationships with practice.

11.10 **Students**

The Visiting Board met representatives of all years of the Part One and Part Two programmes at a well-attended student meeting. There are presently 298 students in the undergraduate school (years 1 to 5). The students were enthusiastic, committed and passionate about the School. They were drawn to the School for many different reasons:

- Visiting the exhibition which helped them to see architecture from a different perspective
- Attending open juries and seeing the variety of units on offer.
- The foundation programme and/or the summer school.
- The School's reputation.
- The pedagogy was attractive, particularly the open debates

Students identified the strengths of the School as being:

- The diversity of the courses and work, from the very creative to the highly technical.
- Its independent status outside a formal higher education institution.
- Uniqueness
- The diversity of student body in nationalities and ages represented
- Its close-knit community.
- The openness in debates that some students had not experienced elsewhere. Students can explore an independent/radical strand or seam if they wish. Some preferred more directional briefs, others preferred a freer approach.
- The opportunity to view any jury from any year or unit

- The opportunity to attend any classes from any year or unit
- There was some disagreement about the breadth of the programme and the range of units on offer, some describing the range as ‘incredible’, others believing there was less diversity than supposed. There was also a discussion as to the extent to which students were inspired/led/constrained by unit masters. The general consensus appeared to be that there is enormous scope for learning if individual students wanted to make use of it.
- Students appreciated the opportunity to develop a conversation and a project within the unit system and build a portfolio. Some think that the restructured first year has lost this. Older students who had experienced the first year in its former unit structure wondered at the wisdom of changing it to a year structure.
- Present first years appreciated the studio structure as it helped them become accustomed to the School. There was greater motivation and more exposure to different ideas in a larger group.
- The extremely rich programme. There is a great variety in History and Theory studies
- The students had confidence that in the end the system works. Students who had studied for five years thought that there was a coherent, focussed, programme.
- There were differences of opinion regarding the amount and usefulness of feedback and formal systems of assessment, some preferring to know precisely where they stood at various points in the year and others preferring a freer approach. The new student handbook is new this year (2006/2007

academic session) had clarified the assessment procedures to a greater extent.

Amongst the concerns raised by students were:

- The comparative merits and disadvantages of the unit system
- It is hard to feel that there is an impartial or tertiary mentor apart from their tutor. The formalisation of the Academic Head post has gone some way to providing this, and students greatly appreciated the support and advice offered by the Registrar and her team. However, students believed there was a good case for introducing a mentoring system which would address student problems and help reduce the drop-out rate.
- There appears to be an apathy among the students about what happens in the School. Turn out to meetings is not as good as it might be.
- Some believed that the School relied too much on its past. Although students at the AA are not part of the National Union of Students a formal body of students are elected on an annual basis to form the “AA Student Forum” and they represent all registered students at the AA School, i.e. undergraduate and postgraduate.

The Board was concerned that there was a perception amongst students that Technical Studies were only necessary to meet RIBA requirements. Students appeared not to be aware of the requirements of the jointly held ARB/RIBA criteria and the necessity of satisfying these requirements to practice with the title ‘architect’.

The Board was pleased to meet a very large number of the staff involved in teaching at the school. The variety of skills, expertise and the level of talent were remarkable. Acknowledging that many of the staff present were not employed at the School in 2002, the Board was nonetheless surprised that few of the staff appeared to have read the last Visiting Board report, despite its being lodged in the Library.

Given the high number of staff employed on temporary contracts, the Board was interested in exploring its impact on the notion of the school as a coherent body. The AA sees itself as a participatory democracy. The channels of communication appear to be plentiful but not particularly formalised; the Board understood that there are regular formal and informal meetings between all staff, administrative and academic. The Registry in particular is an important point of information for students. Although on short contracts, in practice many have been at the School for many years, therefore there is an element of continuity.

The development of the School's pedagogy is heavily influenced by the fact that so many teachers are in active practice. It does not believe that there is a 'consensus' about architectural education, looking at itself as a microcosm of the outside world, which provides a more productive and challenging environment in which to learn.

The School re-evaluates all its activities, ensuring that the programmes develop and remain relevant and fresh. Changes come about as the result of debate rather than committee decisions, for example the research clusters and the restructuring of the jury system. The restructuring of the first year is seen to be a success, resulting in more

confident, engaged, questioning and vocal students entering the second year.

The Board was also interested in exploring parity of experience and achievement across all units and the relationship between students and unit masters. The staff believed that students exercise a lot of choice in the School and make informed decisions constantly. There was great diversity among the units and that there was no question of a 'brand'. The Unit structure develops strong architects and teams, working through collaboration to achieve common aims while encouraging constructive competition.

In both the Intermediate and Diploma programmes, the tutors set the agenda and the students respond critically. Students who choose a particular tutor do so on an informed basis, while others may choose to follow a more open unit. It is possible to consult staff (academic and administrative) other than a unit master if a student is experiencing problems, although staff believed that if students asked for a mentoring scheme it would seriously be considered.

The administrative staff are an integral part of the life and ethos of the School, giving a great deal of support to the students. They are fully conversant with the work of the staff and can even advise students about units.

Staff development funding and training opportunities exist for those who request it; this is not on a formal basis but the School will back initiatives undertaken by unit masters. There is no formal sabbatical process but it is possible to have unpaid leave. The unit system itself is seen as staff development and is a factor in people's decision to work at

the School. Part Three examiners shadow an experienced panel for a year before they examine.

SSRs at the School are exceptional, being 1:3 when taken as a whole.

11.12 Research:

Research activity is very good. This is the area of greatest change in the School. Postgraduate studies at the AA have grown greatly since the last Visiting Board. The Graduate School is now as large as the undergraduate school. There are seven postgraduate taught courses and an MPhil/PhD research programme.

In 2005, as an addition to the existing permanent research groups, four time-limited ‘research clusters’ were implemented (New Media and Information Systems; Environment, Energy and Sustainability; Alternative Practices and Research Initiatives; Architectural Urbanism, Social and Political Space.). The research clusters are intended to provide opportunities for everyone to discuss topics that cut across all units and areas of investigation. Their full impact on the validated programmes has yet to be assessed but it is very promising. The Board considered this to be a truly integrated process as staff are involved in both research and teaching.

11.13 Equal Opportunities

The School has an impressively diverse staff and student community. To enable it to recruit students who would otherwise be unable to afford to study at the AA, it spends £633,000 million per year on scholarships and is seeking to create larger endowment funds. The Board would encourage the School to further develop its support systems to ensure students, whatever their background,

have the opportunity to achieve their full potential.

The School faces inevitable access difficulties given its historic accommodation, but a special budget has been allocated to address DDA requirements. The Board looks forward to seeing the benefits of this.

11.14 Resourcing and Facilities:

- General

Development of resources is restricted by space on the School’s present site. However, the School has adopted serious measures to address this, investing more than £1million since the previous Visiting Board in 2002 on a wide range of facility upgrades and projects. This has included the fitting out of all teaching spaces with audio-visual facilities.

At around the time of the last Board, the School secured the acquisition of the Hooke Park campus in Dorset. This 350 acre woodland site with workshop and residential buildings allows the School to provide students from various courses and years with the opportunity to live and work together, with the timber buildings onsite allowing the links between contemporary technology and a traditional material to be explored. In 2005 the School secured a £500k legacy which will fund the development of the Hooke Park campus.

In addition to the dedicated facilities described below, students also benefit from the excellent exhibitions in the general circulation and ‘public’ areas of the building.

- Studios

The School recognises that a continuing challenge it must respond to is the provision of studio space for its students.

The School retains its strategy of acquiring short-lease properties in the vicinity to provide a limited number of studio spaces for its students. In 2006/7 the School is experimenting by making available block-booking arrangements that allow individual units to secure studio space for extended periods. The School intends to provide unit space for each student, but in practice the Board learned that most students, in the second and fourth year at least, tend to work from home.

- IT

The main centre for IT is the Electronic Media Lab in the main building. This is open 08.30 to 20.30 on weekdays and 10.00 to 16.00 on Saturdays. There are 45 PCs and 10 Macs for student use, offering most major programmes and some specialist programmes for visual departments. There is also a 'render' farm, 3D and slide scanners, 3D digitisers and A0-A4 printers. Introductory and intermediate teaching sessions for most packages are available and these are available to all students. The School is networked (in some areas wireless). Students are allocated space on the server which can be accessed either from the building or from home. Since the last Visiting Board, the school has created a new computing lab teaching space at 4 Morwell Street as well as renovating its existing Computer Laboratory. The Board found the facilities to be excellent with a good range of standard design packages and capable support staff. Given that many students bring their own laptops into the studio, the provision of IT facilities was more than adequate for demand.

- Workshops and Laboratories

Since the last Visiting Board workshop facilities have been significantly upgraded. A laser cutter has been purchased

and set up at Bedford Square and CNC production facilities have been installed at Hooke Park. An £80k investment has been made in new digital technologies that will form the basis of a new digital prototyping centre the School is committed to creating later in 2007. All of this is in addition to the very well-equipped traditional workshop facilities with hand and machine tools allowing students to work in wood, metal and plastic. The Board found the workshop facilities to be excellent with extremely capable support staff. Students' model making was of a very high quality with an interesting range of materials being used; this was undoubtedly due to the quality of the facility and the level of staff support. The Board did, however learn that with the increased intake to year one, there were beginning to be real space pressures when first year students were working on practical projects.

- Library

Since the last Visiting Board funds have been committed to renovate the Rare Books room and the Librarian's Office. A new online site for the AA Photo Library has been established and developed. The Visiting Board judged the library facilities to be exceptional.

The Architectural Association has a collection of international importance in its library. This is housed in Bedford Square and fully integrated with School Facilities. There are approximately 31,000 titles (41,000 volumes) plus say 5,000 journal issues in the library. A majority are on the shelves but about one third are in store in Morwell Street. There is also an archive of the Association (as yet un-catalogued) in Enfield. The collection includes a number of "treasures", some of which were on display for the visit (e.g. an original of Humphrey Repton).

The main reading room is well used. There is an online catalogue and students can have web access from home. Technical references such as Barbour and British Standards are on line. Interlibrary Loan is available and widely used by students for their research.

Purchasing policy is largely based on the needs of courses and units (who sometimes are asked to split costs). Bibliographies are published for all major invited speakers. Staff have access to University resources (such as UCL) and students can of course use the BAL. Triangle Bookshop offers a discount to the AA Library.

The School benefits from an excellent photo-library. The collection is gradually being digitalised subject to copyright consideration; at the time of the visit approximately 8,000 images were online. There is also an extensive film collection, with an archive dating back several decades of lectures given at the School. The Camera Club has recently been revived. There is a full time exhibition curator.

The Board's impression was that the collection is kept very much up-to-date, that students and staff receive an excellent service and that the small team of Librarians are well-informed, enthusiastic and hard working.

12. Documentation Supplied

12.1 Prior to the visit, the Board was provided by the School with the Critical Self-Appraisal, Questionnaire and Further Information including:

Undergraduate School Programme Specification and Programme Guide 2006/2007.

AA Professional Practice and Practical Experience Examination Programme Specification and Programme Guide 2006/2007
 External Examiners' Reports for Parts One and Two (2002-2006)
 External Examiners Reports for Part Three (2004-2006)
 Report of 2002 Visiting Board
 Student statistics (Registration, Progression and Completion; nationality).
 Undergraduate Student Handbook 2006/2007 Working Out in Architecture: A Student Guide to Getting a Job and Getting the Best Out of Work Experience (Nov 2001; revised Nov. 2006)
 Administrative/Technical Staff Lists
 Undergraduate School Academic Staff Lists and CVs
 Graduate School Academic Staff List plus CVs
 Audited End of Year Report and Financial Statements 2004-2006.

12.2 Board members had access to the following additional information in their base room or the room containing the portfolios:

- Supplementary information to Programme Specifications and Programme Guides 2006/2007
- Complementary Studies Course Criteria for Assessment 2006/2007
- Course Booklet 2005/2006 History & Theory, Technical Studies, Media Studies, Professional Practice (Third Year), Future Practice (Fifth Year), Electronic Media Lab
- Course Booklets 2004/2005: General Studies, Technical Studies, Communications Studies, Professional Practice (Third Year), Future Practice (Fifth Year), Electronics Media Lab.

- Sample forms eg student feedback forms
- Examples of publications
- Press cuttings
- Events posters

12.3 Board members were also provided with a networked PC allowing access to a wide range of additional School documentation.