

**Report of the RIBA visiting board
to the Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool
University (XJTLU)**

Date of visiting board: 17 & 18 October 2019
Confirmed by RIBA Education Committee: 22 January 2020

1 Details of institution hosting course/s

Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University
111 Ren'ai Road
Suzhou Dushu Lake Science and Education Innovation District
Suzhou Industrial Park
Suzhou
P. R. China
215123

2 Head of Architecture

Dr Gisela Loehlein

3 Courses offered for validation

BEng Architecture, Part 1
Master of Architectural Design, Part 2

4 Awarding body

Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University

5 The visiting board

Professor Don Gray – Chair, academic
Peter Garstecki, practitioner
John Ashton – practitioner
Paula Craft-Pegg, academic
Peter Marshall – regional representative

Stephanie Beasley-Suffolk – validation manager – in attendance.

6 Procedures and criteria for the visit

The visiting board was carried out under the *RIBA procedures for validation and validation criteria for UK and international courses and examinations in architecture* (published July 2011, and effective from September 2011); this document is available at www.architecture.com.

7 Proposals of the visiting board

On 22 January 2020 the RIBA Education Committee confirmed continued validation of the following courses:

- BEng Architecture, Part 1
- Master of Architectural Design, Part 2

The next full visiting board will take place in 2024.

8 Standard requirements for continued recognition

Continued RIBA recognition of all courses and qualifications is dependent upon:

- i external examiners being appointed for the course
- ii any significant changes to the courses and qualifications being submitted to the RIBA

- iii any change of award title, and the effective date of the change, being notified to the RIBA so that its recognition may formally be transferred to the new title
- iv submission to the RIBA of the names of students passing the courses and qualifications listed
- v In the UK, standard requirements of validation include the completion by the institution of the annual statistical return issued by the RIBA Education Department

9 Academic position statement (*written by the School*)

1. Introduction

Founded in 2011, the Department of Architecture at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU) is part of a young Sino-British university situated in Suzhou, a city which falls within the greater Shanghai area. With construction of the university's new South Campus underway, in 2016, the Department moved into its new Design Building which it shares with the Department of Industrial Design, the building's facilities of the highest international standards. Set in China, but closely connected with the University of Liverpool and the UK framework of architectural education, the Department's aim is to offer a new global model of architectural education. The fostering of the students' critical thinking skills is an important and distinctive characteristic of its Bachelor, Master and PhD programmes. In an environment that is fast-changing, the Department seeks to educate students in order to enable them to take advantage of arising opportunities. This includes the possibility of working as a "liberal professional," which has only recently become an option in China, and offers new ways of practicing architecture for current and future generations of architects. As a relatively new and uniquely positioned architecture school, the Department thus affirms and advances the merits of architectural education as vital to developing critical thinking skills for the longer-term future.

2. Department Identity and Vision

With a faculty that contributes experiences in practice and research in more than twenty countries, the international make-up of the Department of Architecture at XJTLU is unique in China. It brings together traditions and opportunities from the East and the West, and seeks to provide the best of both perspectives in architectural and urban design, offering new views on the local context as well as on global issues. As China continues to undergo processes of modernisation, the Department is particularly aware of its responsibility in educating a new generation of architects who face enormous challenges. There is an emerging interest in topics such as the environment, building tectonics, cultural heritage, and user-centred design, as well as growing recognition of the necessity to reinvest in the extant built environment through urban regeneration and the refurbishment of existing building stock. These issues and concerns are viewed by the Department as a challenge and as an opportunity, and it responds through its focus on new human-centred approaches to learning, practicing and researching architectural design, in order to nurture attitudes that will prove valuable in the future. For there is a need – not only in China – for

Architects who are critical thinkers and highly qualified professionals. Both the undergraduate and the postgraduate programmes centre on applied architectural design studio modules (50%), which are supported by a balanced mix of humanities-based and technical modules (25% each). The Department's research concentrates on three headline research areas:

- *History, Theory and Heritage offers connections with Suzhou and other heritage sites in China, addressing, in particular, questions pertaining to multiculturalism and transnationalism.*
- *Computational Design and Fabrication enables students to be cutting edge in the technology realm field. It further allows the department to connect and collaborate with innovative high-tech industries in the context of Suzhou Industrial Park (SIP), with research in the processes of design and professional practice key areas of interest.*
- *Urban Ecologies engages with the changing nature of global urbanisation, with a focus on radically new approaches to the study of cities and their environment that are informed by research in science, technology and sustainable construction, as well as by studies in sociology, art, design, and aesthetics.*

The Department is also committed to Research by Design, an experimental form of research that is specific to the architectural discipline, with less conventional research outcomes, such as prototypes, projects, buildings, components, and exhibitions. To this end, the Design Research Centre (DRC) has been established to facilitate small-scale pilot projects. It has a flexible staff structure, allows students and staff to collaborate on design competition projects, along with local professional architects who will contribute their specific competences in architectural design, planning, and construction and the DRC has successfully taken part in a series of architectural competition within China and in the international context.

3. Academic Agenda

The following key points are based on staff views, student feedback, internal University reports, and external reports by examiners and professional bodies:

Recent exceptional areas of activity

- *International validation of the BEng(Hons) Architecture programme at Part 1 level by the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in February 2015, a first for a Chinese university.*
- *Award of candidate course status to the Master of Architectural Design programme by RIBA in December 2016, also a first for a Chinese University.*
- *International validation of Master of Architectural Design at part 2 level in February 2018.*
- *Excellent profile of an international faculty with experience in practice and research in more than 20 countries directly supporting undergraduate and postgraduate learning.*
- *Location of the Department in a new building, shared with the Department of Industrial Design, with a strong architectural identity, offering an ideal showcase for its staff and students in spaces with a particular character.*
- *Initiatives such as international workshops, student competitions, and, summer research projects within the framework of XJTLU's Summer Undergraduate Fellowships (SURF), positively impacting the programmes' development.*
- *Establishment of the first*

online architectural magazine in English in China, Masterplanning the Future (MPTF), which is student-led and has a continuously growing number of students actively participating.

Individuality of the learning environment in the Chinese context • Positioned in Suzhou, both a heritage city (classical gardens recognised as UNESCO World Heritage Sites) and an extremely dynamic new city, now the fourth largest concentration of economic activity in China in terms of GDP. • Unique offering of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in English in China, taught by international educators.

• Excellent resources on a new campus, open to the vibrant life of one of China's flagship development projects, the Suzhou Industrial Park (SIP), within which the University and more than 100 Fortune 500 companies operate, offering a high quality of life. • Excellent building resources supporting a vibrant studio culture, with dedicated spaces for design studios, reviews, and physical modelling, as well as for a materials library. • Recruitment of students from amongst the top 5% of Chinese high school graduates, and a progressive increase of international students.

Differences between Bachelor and Master degrees • BEng programme: provides a clear sequence of design studios with the gradual introduction of ideas and skills, with a focus on the attainment of personal and professional confidence in order to take advantage of practice experience. • MArchDes programme: fosters student autonomy and responsibility in pursuing individual interests in view of future professional career development opportunities, with the second year framed as a “research by design” year. • MArchDes programme: connection with XJTLU’s Master programmes in Urban Planning and Urban Design (with the Urban Planning and Design Department) in year one creates unique possibilities for interdisciplinary design research.

Relevance to professional practice • Design studio themes are strongly connected with real-world problems and necessities in China and beyond; lecture courses and coursework are related to contemporary issues and current concerns. • Practicing architects in Suzhou and Shanghai contribute as part-time tutors and visiting critics, and present guest lectures, lead site visits, and offer internships for students. • Establishment of a Design Research Centre which seeks to actively involve staff, students and local practicing architects in the development of pilot projects. • Graduates work in top architectural offices, and assist in strengthening the connections of the Department to local practice.

Creative criteria delivering course content • Innovative learning environment that fosters independent, creative and responsible designers with a thoughtful, research-led and imaginative approach to place-making. • Close collaboration with the two other Departments of the Design Cluster (Urban Planning & Design, Civil Engineering, School of Film & Television and Industrial Design), with the Department of Industrial Design (with shared facilities in the new Design Building), developing a culture of teamwork and a multidisciplinary approach to design. • Flexible

programme design, with the active participation of a dynamic faculty, delivering responsive, changing projects that complement and extend core learning whilst still maintaining criteria fulfilling content.

10 Commendations

The visiting board made the following commendations:

- 10.1 The Board was impressed by the ambitious vision for the University and School as described by Professor Youmin Xi, Executive President of Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, and was reassured to understand that support for the School will continue.
- 10.2 The Board recognised the contribution of dedicated and diverse staff, committed to the evolution of the School.
- 10.3 The provision of exceptional workshop facilities, studios and resources.
- 10.4 Design briefs at Part 1 and 2 were rich and diverse with strong narratives and design development. The Board was pleased to note that the School has ensured that Chinese history and heritage has been maintained as an important component of student learning.

11 Conditions

There are no conditions.

12 Action points

The visiting board proposes the following action points. The RIBA expects the university to report on how it will address these action points. The university is referred to the RIBA's criteria and procedures for validation for details of mid-term monitoring processes. Failure by the university to satisfactorily resolve action points may result in a course being conditioned by a future visiting board.

- 12.1 In reviewing academic portfolios, the Board found insufficient evidence of compliance with GC10.3 in both Part 1 and Part 2 programmes. Project briefs and outputs should ensure that designs are prepared and submitted which will comply with UK legislation, appropriate performance standards and health and safety requirements. Academic portfolios for Parts 1 and 2 must also demonstrate knowledge of GC11.

The School should review the content of ARC306 and how it addresses criterion 10.3.

13 Advice

The visiting board offers the following advice to the School on desirable, but not essential improvements, which, it is felt, would assist course development and raise standards.

General:

- 13.1 The moderation and assessment arrangements between XJTLU China and the School of Architecture in Liverpool UK appear to be onerous for

XJTLU. While these arrangements may have been appropriate during the inaugural years of the programme, they now appear like an imposition. The Board advises that both institutions revisit the moderation/assessment procedures to reduce them to the minimum necessary.

- 13.2 The Board heard from some staff that the administrative load on lecturers and tutors was greater than commensurate with the development of staff research. The School should review teaching loads and administrative provision to allow staff adequate opportunity to pursue research interests.
- 13.3 The Board advises that the School creates a concise mapping matrix which aligns the general criteria against module numbers.
- 13.4 The ARB prescribed award is only available to students who complete their studies in the UK. The Board advises that this is clarified in the Student Handbook and other relevant documentation.
- 13.5 Students stated that they would value the possibility of undertaking an elective module. The Board advises that elective modules are considered for inclusion.

Part 1:

- 13.6 The Board found that Action Point 13.7 of the October 2014 Visiting Board for the BEng Architecture (Part 1) had been partially met. The Board advises that the use of sketching and freehand drawing as a critical and creative tool during the development of the design project should be actively encouraged and evidenced in all academic portfolios (GC3.3).

Part 2:

- 13.7 In appraising the final project of the Master's programme, consideration should be given to the balance between assessed written and design submissions.

14 Delivery of graduate attributes

It should be noted that where the visiting board considered graduate attributes to have been met, no commentary is offered. Where concerns were noted (or an attribute clearly not met), commentary is supplied. Finally, where academic outcomes suggested a graduate attribute was particularly positively demonstrated, commentary is supplied.

14.1 BEng Architecture, Part 1

The Board confirmed that all Part 1 graduate attributes were met.

14.2 Master of Architectural Design, Part 2

The Board confirmed that all Part 2 graduate attributes were met.

15 Review of work against criteria

It should be noted that where the visiting board considered a criterion to have been met, no commentary is offered. Where concerns were noted (or

a criterion clearly not met), commentary is supplied. Finally, where academic outcomes suggested a criterion was particularly positively demonstrated, commentary is supplied.

15.1 The Board made no further comments.

16 Other information

16.1 Student numbers

Part 1: 400

Part 2: 30

16.2 Documentation provided

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

17. Notes of meetings

On request, the RIBA will issue a copy of the minutes taken from the following meetings: **These notes will not form part of the published report but will be made available on request. The full set of notes will be issued to the mid-term panel and the next full visiting board.**

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