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Sent by email to Mr John McLaughlin

12 March 2020

Dear Mr McLaughlin,

Re: Institutional Response: External Examiner Annual Report 2018/19

I am writing further to the receipt of your report for Masters in Architecture.

Your report has been considered by colleagues in the School and is the basis of this Institutional Response on behalf of the Vice-Chancellor. The School will also use its contents to help inform their [Annual Review and Enhancement](#) process and where appropriate, [Periodic Review](#).

The University is pleased to note your positive comments including:

1. Your positive indications regarding the programme structure, academic standards and assessment process.
2. The school achieves the difficult balance of being intellectually ambitious and simultaneously having its feet on the ground.
3. Particular care was taken to ensure that the marking scheme was adapted to the different thematic units so that there was an equitable approach to marking the different outputs.
4. The focus on student wellbeing last year seems to have had a beneficial impact with greater wellbeing reported by students in the feedback session this year. The students expressed strong appreciation of the staff, particularly the course leader.
5. The quality of the staff research is exceptionally high, and that students are aware of the professional strength and rigour of the school, and that this is a major attraction for them.
6. It is really commendable that the WSA has created a culture where teaching, research, and practice are integrated, and the idea of architecture as a practice runs through all parts of the course and is the



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core strength and attraction for students, so the school should consolidate this as much as possible.

Issues highlighted in your report and response provided by the School:

1. ***Year-on-Year Comments:*** *No practical change has been introduced to engage architect-practitioners as unit-leaders on a multi-annual basis with some time allowance for module preparation and meeting attendance.*

We continue to review the appointment of our external architect-practitioner-consultants as unit leaders and are in the process of discussing this with Cardiff University HR. While we acknowledge that there would be benefits in providing more time for some unit leaders to engage in other teaching and research activities others prefer the current set up.

2. ***Year-on-Year Comments:*** *Review timing of dissertation and studio modules to allow the research choices made in the two modules to cross-pollinate and reinforce each other.*

We reviewed the adjustment of the dissertation submission and Design Thesis module requirements at the end of 2018/19 with our students and staff in both MArch 1 and 2. There was mixed opinion from students – some who would prefer to keep the structure as it is; some who would prefer a pre-Christmas dissertation submission; and a minority who would prefer the Dissertation completed in MArch 1.

Overall it is recognised that the dissertation needs to be located in MArch 2 to allow students to develop appropriate Research skills (developing scope, aims, methods, literature review etc) during MArch 1. Staff are looking at moving the submission deadline to pre-Christmas for 2020/ 21, this is due to the implications on the Research Preparation module timing, coordination and content in MArch 1 so that students would be ready for an earlier submission. However, it is recognised that this might have a greater impact on the Autumn semester Design Thesis performance and will therefore be regularly reviewed.

The school currently sees benefit in allowing freedom for students to select differing Dissertation and Design Thesis subjects, however, the benefits of allowing cross-pollination are acknowledged. We are reviewing the process of how and when unit themes are identified to allow for earlier dissemination of unit themes when students select their dissertation focus.

3. ***Year-on-Year Comments:*** *Repeat of recommendation that the research stage of the design studio projects be limited to the first term.*

Further to our response to this in 2018/19, for 2019/20 we have made 2 significant changes partly aimed at constraining the 'research phase;' to the Autumn semester:

1. Consolidating our number of teachings weeks to 24, with the intention to tie up conceptual and primer 'research' by Christmas so that the Spring semester can be focussed on design development and detail.
 2. Introduced an indicative assessment point at the Christmas review to provide summative closure and guidance on the 'research' work. However, it is also acknowledged that research will inevitably continue into the Spring semester as students develop a critical and rigorous thesis. Therefore, there will be an opportunity to present the research again at the end of year examination to take account of any further development.
4. ***Noteworthy Practice and Enhancement:*** Recommendation that a way is found to attribute marks to groupwork undertaken as part of the research phase of projects so that every student has an incentive to participate equally in this.

As referred to above, we have introduced an indicative assessment point at the Christmas review to provide summative closure and guidance on the 'research' work. Through the unit specific learning outcomes and criteria, this is aimed at addressing the disparity between the units that conduct group work and those that do not. We will review this at the end of 2019/20.

5. ***Noteworthy Practice and Enhancement:*** Recommendation that the students be asked to produce a short research report and thesis intention at the end of the first term that gets updated and combined with their A3 synoptic portfolio as a full thesis report at the end of semester two.

For 2019/20, we have changed the design submission in all years across the BSc and MArch to a loose-leaf A2 synoptic portfolio submission. A2 was chosen as a transition from our pin-up examination and also for clarity when a panel of 4 assessors need to review the work during the presentation. For the first year, this will also be combined with a basic pin-up to allow students used to the pin-up system to still have significant drawings available for presentation. At the indicative Christmas assessment, students will also be asked to submit a draft A2 portfolio to summarise the research work. We will continue to review these changes and make adjustments as necessary for future years.

We hope that you will find this response satisfactory and thank you for your continued support of the programme.

In order to meet the expectations of the [QAA Quality Code](#), both the External Examiner Annual Report and this Institutional Response will be published on the University's [Public Information website](#) and will be available to all students and staff.

We are most grateful for your comments and for your support in this matter.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Wright', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Mr Simon Wright
Academic Registrar