CARDIFF UNIVERSITY External Examiner Annual Report Form

Guidance notes are available to support the completion of this Report via the Cardiff University Intranet here and from ExternalExaminers@cardiff.ac.uk.

	For completion by External Examiner:		
Name of External Examiner:	Phyllida Mills		
Home Institution / Employer of External Examiner:	Mills Power Ltd		
Programme and / or Modules Covered by this Report	BSc Architecture		
Academic Year / Period Covered by this Report:	2019/2020	Date of Report:	9th June 2020

Please complete all information in the spaces provided and submit within **six weeks** of the Examining Board.

Please note this form will be published online and should not make any reference to any individual students or members of staff in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (2018).

Please extend spaces where necessary.

1. **Programme Structure** (curriculum design, programme structure and level, methods of teaching and learning)

The first year divided into two semester long projects over the course of the year. The first semester design brief did not clearly convey how it broke down into mini-projects, and whether they were distinct projects under an umbrella theme, or steps to a single outcome. There is a risk that students get swamped by long projects that are not distinct and if all projects are accretive, it disadvantages slow starters, who constantly struggle against their poor start. As external examiner, it was difficult to see how this panned out in reality, since we had limited access to the portfolio work. Nevertheless, there were instances of a good variety of skilled interpretive, illustration and presentation techniques, demonstrating curiosity and analysis about the built environment. However, no evidence was seen of the students really getting inside proposals and understanding their scale and atmosphere, such as would be expected in a first year course that has explored the body in space in the first semester.

The second year was structured in a similar way to the previous year and is bedding in successfully with the recent change to scale and content of design briefs for housing in the first semester and alternative public buildings in the second. The second year briefs read very clearly. The structure and content of the technology, DM and history modules have all been successfully rethought and it is clear that

students are seeing the benefits in the quality of their written and technological work and bringing it to their design projects in portfolio.

The third year structure remained broadly the same, with the introduction of a portfolio submission at the end of both semesters 1 and 2. A formative feedback mark was given to students at the end of semester 1, moderated across the units. Higher marks were awarded more evenly across units this year, it's not clear whether this was a result of the interim submission valuing the research phase, or strong students having been deliberately distributed across the units.

One student fed back that the 30% mark in January reassured their unit that they were OK not doing the same as other units. Members of staff noted that marking at the end of semester 1 helped reward effort for research and over all seemed to be a good move with students feeling validated by the interim mark; but the interim mark had the possible side effect of discouraging weaker students and bringing an abrupt stop to research. If the first semester mark is formative only and can be revised by effort in the second semester, this needs to be made clear to students in a fair way, so that a student with a slow start in the first semester, knows they can revisit their first semester's work along with a good second semester's work.

Restructuring DPM as a choice between the 3 options produced some very compelling work interpreting approaches to design. This module has the potential to build on the newly thought design process DPM module of the 2nd year. Similarly, ICA is developing its structure with students presenting to each other, seminars and students paced to create work as they go along. There is a welcome intention to give more credit to group work next year and set a longer essay.

Sadly, the technical module was not restructured for 3rd year, causing poor feedback and frustration from both staff and students.

Overall the programme structure continues to set lengthy design projects. It is not clear whether this is habit, preference, a product of tight resourcing, or an aspiration for everyone to be teaching third year. I have consistently commented that while there is a place for long projects, this needs to be balanced by shorter specific projects with more targeted teaching techniques and learning outcomes in the design module. The students need to learn how to take a brief make a design proposal, analyse, learn and move on. Again, I re-emphasise not every design brief needs to address multiple learning outcomes. Confidence should be taken from the successful shifts made in the smaller modules that very specific tasks can be set that nevertheless have a valid wider impact on the student's learning, for instance the specific light studies in second year has been rewarding for both staff and students and made an impact on the quality of designed projects.

2. **Academic Standards** (comparability with other UK HEIs, achievement of students, any PSRB requirements)

No comment.

3. **The Assessment Process** (enabling achievement of aims and learning outcomes; stretch of assessment; comparability of standards between modules of the same level)

No comment.

4. **Examination of Master's Dissertations** (sample of dissertations received, appropriateness of marking schemes, standard of internal marking, classification of awards)

N/A

5. **Year-on-Year Comments**
   [Previous External Examiner Reports are available from the Cardiff University Website here.]

The introduction of the mini prospectus for each year is very useful in making accessible, in a short form, the over-arching framework of each year of the degree.

First Year
The first year portfolios had recovered somewhat from last year and from what was seen of the spring term work, were generally of a higher standard demonstrating the skill and ambition appropriate to a first year portfolio.

The improvement to the Technology module in first year, with the introduction of a comparison between vernacular and modern buildings in terms of both measured and experiential analysis was well done, giving the students a balance between scientific and personal understanding, and I expect it to develop into a strong component of the course. However, it was unclear whether technology is placed in the context of the wider impact of the built world on the natural.

There is potential for this learning on climate, structure, construction and comfort, to become embedded in the course as part of a renewed focus on sustainability and the impact of the built environment on the planet, developing more confident understanding of environmental data and its meaning in terms of experiencing space, buildings and the natural environment. Students need to develop the skills to evaluate and prioritise the impact of one strategy over another, or one material over another. It is still not clear in the course as a whole how this climate impact overview is delivered for the students.

The technique in BTT, of building up a piece of writing across weeks produced some intriguing and thoughtful work. DPM has come into focus with some really good, interpretive writing about architecture and practice through understanding different design methods.

Technical exploration, BTT and the precedent study were all linked to a study trip to Barcelona, an excellent example of individually differentiated and assessed pieces of work from different modules working together to build up the student's understanding of ways of looking at, thinking about and designing architecture to greater than the sum of its parts.

This focus on relevance between the modules and the student being able to think critically and apply learning from one module to another has been successful.

Second Year
The restructuring of second year continues to improve the quality of the students' experience and of the work produced, particularly the richness of portfolio work. The quality of the portfolios was retrieved from a poor start by this cohort in their first year.

The mini prospectus emphasises 'design in context'. Some studios required master planning at scale, others were more fine grained requiring design at a neighbourhood scale. In the context of a focus on context, it was a noticeable that the middle band of students appeared to be overwhelmed by scale. If studio briefs have a master planning or neighbourhood component, then some theory needs to be injected into the course in whichever module is appropriate addressing topics such as passive orientation, waste management, water management, exercise, shared heating, tree pits, electrical and data services, scale, density, townscape, recycling, low energy, energy generation, urban landscapes.

The alignment of the Technical module teaching with the design process in studio has been improved in a number of ways, with lectures as well as small group tutorials, streamlining of input from passive strategies early on to more technological solutions later in the programme, the involvement of the design tutors in teaching on lighting for instance, and the parallel environmental analysis of an existing public building.

This was reinforced by the alignment of the design and technological submissions. This structure appears to have been largely successful, and certainly more relevant environmental design was visible in the portfolios, also showing more skill and engagement with technical aspects of design.

Feedback from the students was that simultaneous design and technological submissions on the same day was, 'stressful', however they could see the logic of it. The students experience of this more integrated attitude to technology teaching was very varied and seemed to depend on the individuals involved. Some tutors were wary of technology input, some were less aware that the structure had changed to integrate the module more with the design studio, a number pointed to the gap of tuition between technical teaching, seminars and support stopping in March and the portfolio submission at the end of the year.

Third Year
The third year units showed a breadth of briefs. A number of units showed strong research phases with good presentation of the research including observational and experiential recording or extensive research and data analysis, some had both but the tendency was to be strong in one or the other. Other units had unremarkable site analysis and quite formalistic investigations. Feedback from unit leaders indicates there is no discussion or teaching on how to research and how to represent research data in compelling graphic form. There is a reliance on students arriving at how to research and how to represent their work unsupported, without any access to theory.

The final presented design had a tendency to lose sight of the initial theme of the unit. A successful unit would ideally communicate its theme equally through presentation of the research phase and through final presentation of the design project, the one should be tangible in the other. The school does not have a house style and portfolios are illustrated in a wide variety of techniques, which is great, but there is room to improve graphic communication, so that a drawing can stand alone without wordy captions.

Another characteristic was that there was little focus on individual human experience in the final proposals, no sense of people inhabiting the designs.

It was also noticeable across the units that there was no analysis of environmental impacts, sourcing of materials, materials extraction. None of the units seen displayed any understanding of the wider context of sustainability and impact on resources and climate generally.

The third year course continues to suffer from poor organisation and integration of technical teaching. Technical teaching has evolved in the first and second years and it is essential to improve the third year so that students are able to use their technical knowledge to inspire and support their spatial design.

The problem based nature of the PME module which is almost entirely group work carrying out a building study is valued by students. This is one possible model for revamping the technology module.

Generally, students appreciated personal tuition, but missed peer to peer feedback and informal and group tutorials, it was, 'weird not seeing what other students were doing'. The Christmas walk around was appreciated. The students like the different flavours of the units and think there is enough variety.

6. **Preparation for the role of External Examiner (for new External Examiners only)** (appropriateness of briefing provided by the programme team and supporting information, visits to School, ability to meet with students, arrangements for accessing work to review)

This year remote access arrangements to view the work on-line were inadequate. There was too much information, poorly organised in individual files, too slow to download and view via software with poor navigation. I assume that more practice at this will have by now improved matters for external examiners who need quick, simultaneous access to a large amount of visual information in order to gain an overview of the course. Some of the portfolios were 800 Megs, which is pointless for reviewing on screen and makes the process incredibly and tediously slow. This also points to a lack of awareness by the staff/students of some basic principles of electronic communication. A 5 megabyte limit should be set for student portfolios to be viewed on screen.

7. **Noteworthy Practice and Enhancement** (good and innovative practice in learning, teaching and assessment; opportunities for enhancement of learning opportunities)

See above in Year on Year.

8. **Appointment Overview (for retiring External Examiners only)** (significant changes in standards, programme/discipline developments, implementation of recommendations, further areas of work)

The school has consistently responded positively to my thoughts and observations. It has succeeded in implementing recommendations on a rolling basis, with a few areas of the course still to be reviewed. The school has responded to feedback by taking steps to improve briefs and the pacing of projects, diversify projects, recruit women to the staff and address areas of the curriculum where teaching was not succeeding.

I very much appreciate the welcome given to me, and would like to thank the school for their hospitality and generosity in showing me so much of their work and processes, triumphs and their preparedness to recognise where improvements can be made.

I have touched on programme and discipline developments over the years in each of my reports, which bear re-reading, and here describe areas for further work in the coming years.

In no particular order:

Staffing
The school should maintain continued vigilance on recruitment to its body of staff, seeking fair representation of women and diversity among the teaching, examining and researching staff, internal and external. This requires thought and forward planning, not just reliance on across the board percentages, so that for students throughout the school, there is access to design practice, research and leadership from a diverse staff. The school has made progress on this issue over the last few years and needs to push further.

Esprit de Corps
There are a significant number of visiting UK and international staff as well as full and part time staff. As I have commented before this brings its challenges for the school leadership in terms of building an esprit de corps, but also opportunities for diverse and imaginative input to the structure and content of the degree.

Tendency to set long design projects
I have touched on the tendency to set long projects in my comments above in Year on Year. I have continually encouraged warm up briefs and bridge briefs and for the school to move on from a habitual reliance on a single brief for an entire year, term or semester. Shorter projects allow students to practice in short time turning a response to a brief into a finished output, whether a design with a plan, a structural or material proposal, a ventilation or daylight solution or a context study. The students acquire experience and ultimately skill in the iterative process of design - turning concept into resolution.

Impact on climate and planet
A few projects explicitly address climate issues, but all portfolios should show students' understanding of the wider impact of their proposals in terms for instance of embodied carbon or energy in use and evidence of weighing sustainability and big picture climate change issues. As I have said before, the school needs to take a position on embedding sustainable design and not leave this to incidental teaching in studio.

Group work
Opportunities should be found for more structured group work across the course, where students can learn team working, negotiation and collaboration.

Human experience
Increase the focus on people and human experience, how do people use and occupy buildings? How does the individual space and organisation of spaces inside and out, help people to do what they need to do? If not all drawings can include people, then there should at least be illustrations of the human eye level experience.

Premises
As was brought home to me through trying to review an entire school's work online, there is nothing as powerful as seeing actual work in actual space, reinforced by comments from students who miss seeing each other's work. Architecture students learn significantly from seeing each other develop as designers and challenging each other. The school when last seen is looking tired and requires investment in its premises. The 'doughnut building' with the long corridor means teaching takes place in cellular space. Investment and radical refurbishment is required to make it look and feel more like a design school, allowing students and staff to see each other's work across years and units, casually and formally and to promote and communicate the ethos of the school.

Be light on your feet
Where some of the smaller modules have recently been redesigned, such as in history and technical areas, they have been very successful and received good feedback from the students. I would encourage more experimentation, in particular more experimentation with teaching in the design studios, for instance to address my comments above in Year on Year to cover research, climate impact and master planning. The imaginative and innovative teaching emerging from history and now from digital and technical staff could inform teaching in studio and the interplay of 'in-house' and visiting staff. Challenge yourselves.

Access to facilities
As students return into the school for teaching, they will have been starved of facilities including libraries, workshops and social exchange. In previous years, students have felt that facilities were shut down at the school's convenience and not matched to their needs with regard to access to workshops and print facilities up to hand in day.

Size of cohort
The increased size of the cohort has been well assimilated.

Forward planning
Forward plan the rotation of staff teaching the different year groups. Last minute changes were perhaps the cause of the poor first year in 2019/20.

Student experience
This must be an essential component of review for the next external examiner.

Technical teaching
Integration of technical teaching with design creativity has improved over the years, but still needs vigilance, and fundamental change in third year. The students should be solving the technical aspects of their designs creatively, with a confident manipulation of the sometimes contradictory requirements of structure, construction and environment.

Graphic communication
Drawings presenting research and design should speak for themselves. Drawings generally should be more accurate and more powerful and stand alone to communicate the student's intentions, research for and resolution of the project, relying less on lengthy verbal or written description.

Standards
The school needs to look at how standards can be raised across each year's cohort, so that more students produce good and comprehensive level work. This will depend on aspirations and standards being raised across the degree in all years and on the strength and clarity of all modules.

I wish the students, staff and school well!

9. Annual Report Checklist

Please include appropriate comments within Sections 1-7 above for any answer of 'No'.

		Yes (Y)	No (N)	N/A (N/A)
Programme/Course information				
9.1	Did you receive sufficient information about the Programme and its contents, learning outcomes and assessments?	Y		
9.2	Were you asked to comment on any changes to the assessment of the Programme?		N	
Commenting on draft examination question papers				
9.3	Were you asked to approve all examination papers contributing to the final award?			N/A
9.4	Were the nature, spread and level of the questions appropriate?			N/A
9.5	Were suitable arrangements made to consider your comments?			N/A
Examination scripts				
9.6	Did you receive a sufficient number of scripts to be able to assess whether the internal marking and classifications were appropriate and consistent?			N/A
9.7	Was the general standard and consistency of marking appropriate?			N/A
9.8	Were the scripts marked in such a way as to enable you to see the reasons for the award of given marks?			N/A
9.9	Were you satisfied with the standard and consistency of marking applied by the internal examiners?			N/A
9.10	In your judgement, did you have the opportunity to examine a sufficient cross-section of candidates' work contributing to the final assessment?			N/A
Coursework and practical assessments				
9.11	Was the choice of subjects for coursework and / or practical assessments appropriate?	Y		

9.12	Were you afforded access to an appropriate sample of coursework and / or practical assessments?	**Y**		
9.13	Was the method and general standard of assessment appropriate?	**Y**		
9.14	Is sufficient feedback provided to students on their assessed work?	**Y**		
Clinical examinations (if applicable)				
9.15	Were satisfactory arrangements made for the conduct of clinical assessments?			**N/A**
Sampling of work				
9.16	Were you afforded sufficient time to consider samples of assessed work?	**Y**		
Examining board meeting				
9.17	Were you able to attend the Examining Board meeting?	**Y**		
9.18	Was the Examining Board conducted properly, in accordance with established procedures and to your satisfaction?	**Y**		
9.19	Cardiff University recognises the productive contribution of External Examiners to the assessment process and, in particular, to the work of the Examining Board. Have you had adequate opportunities to discuss the Programme and any outstanding concerns with the Examining Board or its officers?	**Y**		
Joint examining board meeting (if applicable)				
9.20	Did you attend a Composite Examining Board, i.e. one convened to consider the award of Joint Honours degrees?			**N/A**
9.21	If so, were you made aware of the procedures and conventions for the award of Joint Honours degrees?			**N/A**
9.22	Was the Composite Examining Board conducted according to its rules?			**N/A**

Please return this Report, **in a Microsoft Word format**, by email to:
externalexaminers@cardiff.ac.uk

Your fee and expenses claim form and receipts, should be sent electronically to the above email address or in hard copy to:

External Examiners, Registry, Cardiff University, McKenzie House, 30-36 Newport Road, Cardiff, CF24 0DE