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:	Rachel Sara		
Home Institution / Employer of External Examiner:	Birmingham City University		
Programme and / or Modules Covered by this Report	M.Arch		
Academic Year / Period Covered by this Report:	2019/20	Date of Report:	08.11.20

Please complete all information in the spaces provided and submit within **six weeks** of the Examining Board (the dissertation stage Examining Board in the case of postgraduate Master's programmes).

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

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)

Please include consideration of the following:

- *confirmation that the actions taken as a result of the variation of assessments in relation to industrial action and Covid-19 have been appropriate to protect the academic standards of the programme and have allowed students to achieve their programme level learning outcomes*

I am confident that the actions taken by the course team did protect the academic standards of the course. Students really have achieved at the highest levels and this is testament to the flexibility, creativity and engagement of the course team and visiting tutors.

The structure of the M.Arch 1 involving short courses meant that the year had already completed its 'in person' teaching by the time that the pandemic hit. Since the April course was scheduled to be online anyway, the first year of the March was largely unaffected by the pandemic. However aspects of the course design can be

considered as good practice for blended and online teaching models, including the way in where there are peer group activities to help build peer support networks and the relationship between the 'pop-up' studio and the online environments. The inclusion of involvement with the rest of the school of architecture, including socials and other events is also helpful in building a connection to the school for people who may be new to the school and who join a part-time, practice-based year that could potentially lead to them feeling rather separate. This has developed from previous years to reflect the changing profile of students – from those who have continued from the WSA pt1 course to more who join the course from elsewhere. The risk of the students being isolated in this year is also mitigated by the involvement of the practice visitors, who really help to bridge the link between the school and practice.

The amendment to a 100% digital submission also worked well. In AR4403 Reflective Practice, the peer review process was a very good element. Finally in M.Arch 1, it is good to see that the course team are already considering how to develop the modules to respond to students who have lost their practice employment, including the proposals for 'practice shadowing'.

In M.Arch 2, the amendments made were appropriate and helped students to achieve at the highest levels during very difficult circumstances. Students were very supportive of the changes made and there were even some students who preferred the new arrangements. The time extension that students were given in order to complete their design thesis projects was wholly appropriate. In addition the assurance that students should not be penalised for a lack of physical models in order to communicate their design ideas was also appropriate and helpful. When the studio shifted to online tutorials, these seemed to work well, and some extra time was introduced to further support the students, which was helpful.

The second year of the M.Arch really signifies a shift from the practice-base of the 1st year, to a research-base of the University. This is quite a shift but the students seem to make that move very well, as judged by the quality of their research work. In the dissertation, the introduction of the student conference, in which to share the work generated through the dissertation was a valuable addition, and an example of really good practice that should be celebrated. There was a really strong development of a connection between the studio and the dissertation this year, which seems to make a lot of sense. It would be very valuable if the unit leaders from the studio were invited and able to attend this day, as this will further build connections between the two elements of the final year. There is also potential to explore opportunities to amend the timings of the unit choices, so that these can better inform potential dissertation choices (at present the decisions about the dissertation are made well before the unit choices are available).

For the M.Arch studio, the teaching is undertaken in units. These all performed well, with some very interesting work emerging from the new unit 1.5 degrees, including a project marked at the very highest level. It is interesting to note that this unit was run by two people – which can make it easier to reflect and develop teaching practice. It is worth considering doing this more often – where slightly larger units can be led by a teaching pair in order to reduce the potential for the units to feel quite isolated. There are also still some opportunities to build more cross-unit reviews to mitigate the potential for the units to remain as isolated bubbles. The introduction of the year gallery for the M.Arch 2 is a really strong idea, and overall the structure of this year seems to be very clear and this benefitted students, particularly in a challenging time.

The technology component of the thesis project is very well integrated. However there is potential to bring this focus forward to be earlier in the study, as well as to better connect with the unit leaders.

The practice management and economics (10 credits) PME course is interesting in its introduction to questions about procurement and buildability. Particularly the focus on VALUE, rather than costing. It is also valuable to see the PME linked to the thesis, particularly in the exploration of real clients and funding opportunities where possible, which is a more engaging way of exploring the topic than the previous essay on procurement choices and the portfolio interview. There is some potential to reflect on the differences between UK regulations and other countries' contexts, especially since there are so many international students on the course. It is still perhaps surprising that the practice management module is not located in the first year (in practice) so that opportunities to connect to real-life practice environments be exploited.

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

Please include consideration of the following:

- *module marks are an accurate reflection of the standards they achieved, and the award classification reflects their academic attainment on their degree programme.*
- *if scaling has been recommended by the pre-Examining Board, there is appropriate justification for the recommendation based on the scaling guidance and the proposed scaling methodology to be applied to the marks is appropriate*
- *the application of the Safety Net Policy to ensure that students' award classification reflects their academic attainment on the degree programme, and that the degree classification is not affected by any potential dip in their academic performance in assessments undertaken during a period of disruption.*
- *Highlighting where the Safety Net Policy could not be applied/or only in part due to specific PSRB requirements and the outcomes of the discussion and decisions made.*
- *the academic standards of degrees meet the requirements of the relevant national qualifications' framework.*
- *the degrees awarded by the University are valid and reliable and are of an equivalent standard to degrees awarded in previous years.*
- *confirmation that the degree outcomes of each programme under consideration are in line with the sector and meet any professional, statutory, regulatory body requirements.*
- *where issues have been identified, the main Examining Board have been clear in their deliberations and actions to safeguard the academic standards.*

The students largely achieve high standards and the marking of work is in line with other UK HEI's that I am familiar with. I can confirm that the threshold standards of the RIBA/ARB criteria for Part II levels are being met. I saw some extraordinary work

and really congratulate the team on what would, at any time, be a great achievement, but in this time of covid and all the disruption it has brought, is extraordinary. This quality of performance seems to be informed across the course but the involvement of practicing architects who allow students to be working informed by the cutting edge of practice.

The marking that I have sampled has shown that the school is using the full scale of marks which is appropriate, but the impact that this has on the number of good degrees should be observed over a period of time in order to check that there is not significant grade inflation. I should emphasise however that where students received very high marks, I can confirm that the marking was wholly appropriate for extraordinarily high level of work.

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

Please include consideration of the following:

- *assessment variations used are appropriate, and where possible continue to test the module learning outcomes*
- *students continued to be provided with the opportunity to demonstrate achievement of the programme learning outcomes as a result of the variations*
- *assessments continued to be conducted with care and due diligence to ensure that students were not academically disadvantaged as a result of the variations.*

WSA students are challenged to achieve at the highest levels. The proportion of students achieving firsts and 2:1s is very good.

The studios examination procedure was very different this year, and as external examiners we were not involved in the final assessment events but instead scrutinised portfolios online. The process nonetheless worked well and was able to give a good evidence of the range of activities and processes.

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

Where possible please complete this section following the dissertation examining board determining the final award.

I was given a sample of dissertations to look at, the marking schemes and can confirm that the marking was all in line with the standards I would expect.

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

Please note that due to the unprecedented nature of the Covid-19 pandemic, Schools may have had limited time to enact changes.

Although I had expected to be seeing the impact of the newly refurbished Bute building this year, the pandemic meant that we were instead reflecting on the challenges of moving the course online and all of the impacts of that on students' experiences. The course team have managed a really smooth transition in extraordinary times and students have both performed well, and are happy with their experiences given the circumstances.

The potential for the final year design studio units being potentially rather isolated will only be exacerbated by the pandemic and it is heartening to hear of your plans to mitigate against this, as well as plans to help students connect with the city when they are studying in a virtual environment.

Student well-being has not emerged as a particular issue in this academic cycle. Indeed some of the students reported that they actually felt more comfortable studying online. They appreciated the additional time they had to complete their work.

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)

N/A

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

Due to the need to for continued adaptations during the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, we would be grateful if you could please include consideration of the following:

- *advice and guidance on where adaptations can be made to support a blend of high-quality on-campus and online learning for 2020/21 to support Schools with curriculum developments to address ongoing requirements to socially distance due to Covid-19.*

The introduction of the student conference through which students were able to share their dissertation research and the new students were invited to see what they were moving towards was an element of innovative good practice. Examples of how conferences have successfully been held online should give a sensible approach for a virtual alternative to the 'in person' conference. In addition the gallery of student work that was shared on Tumblr was another moment of best practice, with the potential to develop systems to promote the sharing of less finished and polished work, but to also include sketchy initial ideas. This might be facilitated with a prompt to submit a page of multiple initial sketches to force students' hand in sharing this kind of work.

Updated June 2020

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

9. **Issues for Response**

To assist with a timely and detailed response to your report, we would be grateful if you could briefly summarise any issues referred to above that you would like to be specifically addressed in our institutional response.

1. Systems to prevent isolation of newly arriving students (in a largely online teaching environment)
2. Opportunities for connections between studio units (perhaps in the dissertation conference or cross-unit reviews)