

Academic & Student Support Services  
Academic Registrar Simon Wright LLB  
Gwasanaethau Academaidd a Chefnogi Myfyrwyr  
Cofrestrdydd Academaidd Simon Wright LLB



Cardiff University  
McKenzie House  
30-36 Newport Road  
Cardiff CF24 0DE

Tel Ffôn I +44(0)29 2087 9189  
[www.cardiff.ac.uk](http://www.cardiff.ac.uk)

Prifysgol Caerdydd  
Tŷ McKenzie  
30-36 Heol Casnewydd  
Caerdydd CF24 0DE

Sent by email to [john@johnmclaughlin.ie](mailto:john@johnmclaughlin.ie)

28 January 19

Dear Mr McLaughlin,

**Re: Institutional Response: External Examiner Annual Report 2017/18**

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

Your report has been considered by 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](#).

**Issues highlighted in your report:**

1. **Areas for Enhancement:** the appointment of the unit leaders from year to year seems to be an issue since those who are not full-time academic staff don't seem to have notice or time to prepare their unit over the summer.
2. **Areas for Enhancement:** The strongest student in the cohort had managed to align her research interests between her dissertation and her design studio work. The school should consider the timing of these

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modules so that it allows the opportunity to every student to achieve this level of integration.

3. **Areas for Enhancement:** The research phase could be structured to a specific time period (e.g. the first term) with a defined output at that stage. This would allow an opportunity for mid-year feedback and exchange/benchmarking of outputs.
4. **Areas for Enhancement:** The design thesis is somewhat burdened by having to also support the production of the technical requisites for ARB/RIBA. The school might review whether the fulfilment of these requirements could depend more on the M.Arch1 coursework as this seems to be a natural place for it, to liberate the final design thesis further.
5. **Areas for Enhancement:** The students were appreciative of the attempts to raise awareness of mental wellbeing and the relationship to work pressures. They felt however that there is a disconnect with this being referred centrally to university resources, and that it could be better dealt with within the school where their workload would be better understood – perhaps by a member of staff not directly involved in the course.

### Response provided by the School:

1. We are aware of the difficulties in appointing external unit leaders and providing early notification to allow time to prepare and are bringing forward the process for this year so that decisions are made by the end of 2018/19 academic year. The benefits of more security in appointment is understood, the School is looking at alternative ways of appointing external tutors/ consultants with Cardiff University HR. It is acknowledged there could be greater opportunity for tutor interaction and to benchmark, however, there are mixed opinions amongst unit leaders about combined design reviews: some want to do this, some do not. We are looking to provide opportunities for this type of interaction though. A research symposium day has been discussed and may be implemented in 2019/20.
2. The benefits of aligning the dissertation and design thesis is acknowledged, although we recognise this often benefits strong students who are able to align their focussed interests, other often weaker students struggle at an early stage to choose a focus that will guide them for a significant study of work. Having different subjects for the dissertation and design thesis also allows more freedom and diversification of subject matters that cannot always be directly translated into the design thesis. The School is currently reviewing its UG curriculum (both BSc and MArch) which includes how we allow for specialist and focussed learning amongst students such as dissertations aligned to their design thesis. Moving timings to fully align this will involve significant changes to the modules of MArch 1 and 2 and will therefore take time to consider.
3. Unit leaders at MArch 2 are given freedom to develop their own pedagogic approach to their units and therefore timetables within some specific timetabling and organisational parameters. It is acknowledged that some

units stretch the research phases too long, but that also some students stretch this out against the advice of unit leaders. In 2018/19 we will stress the importance of finalising research/ primer stages by the review before the Christmas break to ensure students are into their design project at the start of the Spring semester.

4. As with item 3 the School is currently reviewing its UG curriculum (both BSc and MArch) including all strands of our education. Moving criteria such as the technology requirements will involve changes to the modules of both MArch 1 and 2 and will therefore take time to consider and implement.
5. We have previously held specific wellbeing task and finish groups with the students to address student wellbeing. We are currently unable to resource specific counselling within the School and refer to Cardiff University's professional student counselling and wellbeing team. We are reviewing our personal tutoring arrangements as to whether this should be with someone not connected directly to the students teaching and learning.

**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 programme has an unusual structure with the first year of the masters being based in practice. This structure seems to work very well and offers an excellent example of integration to the current debate about architectural education. The students entering the second year of the masters were offered a compelling choice of design units with a diverse range of themes to choose from.
3. The school achieves the difficult balance of being intellectually ambitious and simultaneously having its feet on the ground. This is an excellent combination that is difficult to achieve.
4. The marking schemes are thorough and rigorous. 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. There was a good number of marks at the higher levels of classification reflecting the high quality of the work.
5. The information sent regarding the role of an External Examiner was clear and concise and gave a strong picture of the course structure and pace in advance of the visit. This was augmented by the briefing given on the first day as well as the excellent booklet of documents that had been prepared. At all times access was available to material and a clear picture was given of where to find it. The meetings with unit leaders and with students were well timed and were very informative.
6. The diversity of teaching units on offer in the WSA is a real strength of the school.

7. The students were appreciative of the attempts to raise awareness of mental wellbeing and the relationship to work pressures.

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,



Mr Simon Wright  
Academic Registrar