



## 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](mailto:ExternalExaminers@cardiff.ac.uk).

	For completion by External Examiner:		
Name of External Examiner:	Dr Samuel Austin		
Home Institution / Employer of External Examiner:	Newcastle University		
Programme and / or Modules Covered by this Report	MA Architectural Design		
Academic Year / Period Covered by this Report:	2017-18	Date of Report:	01.01.2019

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

**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 Data Protection Act (1998).**

Please extend spaces where necessary.

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

Cardiff's MA AD is a well-conceived and thoughtfully structured programme, shaped around a vision of architecture as design research. Core modules are led by a dedicated, friendly and supportive team of tutors who clearly make students feel at ease and emboldened to push beyond the methods already familiar to them. There is a positive atmosphere in which feedback can be received and discussed constructively. Students appear confident – in themselves and in the advice they receive – and inspired by what they are learning. They are clearly relishing the new perspective and ways of working that the programme has offered them, and there's a sense that, for most, this year will be transformational in shaping their future as individuals and professionals. Students from a breadth of backgrounds with diverse reasons for joining the programme all seem to feel they are getting the educational experience they hoped for (or better).

The emphasis on students defining their own architectural position and design research agenda is compellingly set out in course documentation and runs through the teaching activities and learning outcomes of core modules. This appears to be a key attractor for a number of students, especially those who see the programme as a

step towards roles in architectural research or teaching. Students clearly feel empowered by the opportunity to define their own field of enquiry, even if they initially found this a daunting prospect. The range of interests opened up to students, however, seems relatively limited at present, and it would be good to see greater diversity as the programme matures (see also 6 below).

The relation between the MArch and MA AD programmes is neat, well-thought through, and comes with many pedagogical advantages. For the MA AD students, working in MArch design units during the first two semesters (in their Architectural Design Research module) provides an engaging context for the development of design methods and ideas. The studio project work enables students from a breadth of educational backgrounds to hone key skills in architectural design from urban to detail scale, while setting up a lively thematic field of investigation from which they can then define their own thesis research question. This is a clever way to support transition into the programme, maximising the potential for cross-programme peer learning, and accelerating the development of interests and references to inform the thesis.

The opportunity to pursue a single thematic area of enquiry across all three semesters is important to the programme – and highly distinctive. Yet this aspect is not as clearly expressed in documentation as it might be, and it was apparent that the role of ADR as springboard for the Design Thesis wasn't initially clear to students either. There are inevitably challenges in maintaining the distinct trajectory of a smaller cohort while it works closely alongside a larger one with a different structure, but additional MA AD-only sessions may help with this. Students feel they would benefit from more regular ADR workshops or other fora which offer opportunities to see their work in relation to that of MA AD colleagues working in other units and to discuss what they are aiming towards at each stage of their particular module.

The Analysis of Precedents module and the methods it teaches provide a crucial introduction to the notion of practice-based research – and, as the only bespoke MA AD module (other than the thesis), it has a key role in setting the character of the programme. Students learn to identify buildings of interest, analyse them according to a breadth of themes and engage in a comparative dialogue with them. The structure of the module anticipates how individual students find different tools of analysis and design more productive than others, encouraging them to test out a mix of written and drawn methods, and to reflect on their learning. While the module is successful in establishing a research-led design approach, I feel that, given its significance in the programme, it could do more, introducing more diverse techniques and critical lenses under a broader heading of e.g. 'Tools/Methods for Design Research' (see further comments in 2 and 6 below).

There is a good degree of choice within the programme, which allows students to select additional modules that suit their interests and skill sets. This includes a range of specialist options linked with other postgraduate programmes, as well as modules from the School's accredited undergraduate programme. Students can take the latter to enhance their core skills and understanding in architectural technology, humanities or design methods. This is neat and appears to be an effective way to offer students from diverse backgrounds a grounding in European architectural culture and practice. It is also useful for students schooled in related disciplines, such as landscape or interior architecture, who are taking the programme to broaden their design abilities.

Students clearly appreciate the flexibility of options, but they would like to be given a stronger indication of what might be the best modules for them. This could be in the form of a series of suggested combinations linked to different kinds and levels of prior experience. They would also welcome clearer headlines about the kinds of skills that would be required for each module and the focus of assessments, flagging up those that would principally involve calculations, statistical analysis, essays etc. It was noticeable that module options from the BSc programme tend to have most direct relevance to learning in the design studio, and some students who hadn't taken them – especially Issues in Contemporary Architecture – remarked that they felt at a disadvantage. The programme team might consider making ICA compulsory, or integrating some of its content into an expanded research contexts/skills ('Tools for Designing') module.

There is a general sense of the first semester being very – at times too – intense, particularly with certain combinations of specialist modules drawn from other postgraduate programmes). Early block teaching on some of the options, while students are being expected to keep up with MArch-level studio work, was found to be challenging at a point when most need time to adapt to life in the UK, the expectations of UK higher education, and the tutorial-based culture of architectural education. While teaching on core modules was found to be very supportive in this transition, some options were a cause of considerable anxiety. Given the preponderance of fails in some of those modules, it may be worth reflecting on how compatible these are with MA AD – or how the conflict with the demands of studio time can be better managed. Alternatively, there could be a focus on foundational modules in semester one (principally from the BSc Architecture programme), with more specialist options offered in semester 2 once students are more ready for them.

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

I had the opportunity to review the submissions of all students for each module, focussing my attention on the core modules of the programme. I can confirm that standards are at least consistent with those on similar courses at other institutions. There is a good proportion of solid mid-range projects, and some excellent work. Compared to other non-accredited postgraduate architecture programmes that I'm aware of, there are notably few students struggling with the core requirements of design projects. This is a considerable achievement, given the diversity of students' prior skills and experience, and a great credit to the standard of design tuition.

Students are articulate in describing their work and discussing architectural reference points. Presentations are well-structured, conveying a sense that most students have taken ownership of the design research process and understand the logic of the moves they've made. Different aspects of investigation are effectively synthesised towards thoughtful conclusions. The translation of this research into design, however, isn't always as convincing or rigorous. Projects tend to default to relatively predictable solutions where initial studies and themes might have taken the work in more original directions. Nevertheless, students show an impressively steep learning curve and, in expecting a resolved design proposal, the programme demands a lot of them.

The cohort demonstrates considerable skills at urban and precedent analysis, diagramming and developing design strategies from statistical, observational and

other methods broadly from a social sciences tradition. From the work presented, but also in conversation, students seem less comfortable when responding to political and cultural dimensions of projects, to people's (not always rational) desires and the meanings they attach to certain forms, materials, routines etc. There appears to be little critical engagement with different modes of design practice and how they might affect project outcomes, resulting in a tendency to top-down, broad-brush solutions, rather than community-led or more incremental approaches etc. Questioning the role of the architect seems to follow from the programme's agenda to foster practice-led research, and there could be opportunities to address this more within the studio themes.

Relatedly, given the ambition to foster a diversity of student-led research agendas, the outputs tend to be broadly similar in approach and representational methods. This is to some degree understandable for a new programme, especially one that, for most of the cohort, involves considerable transition to a different design culture. But as MA AD becomes established and if, as expected, grows, it would be worth encouraging a greater diversity of starting points and methods in projects, leading to more distinctive outputs. Site and place were the common route into projects when some of the thesis questions might have benefited from a different line of approach. Instead of beginning at city scale, for example, might some projects start from an investigation of a material, condition, experience etc? This might mean opening up a broader range of MArch studios to MA AD students, which would in turn offer a wider range of research themes for enquiry.

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

Wall-based Presentation of final projects enable students to give a comprehensive account of their work and demonstrate the full extent of their learning, including visual and verbal communication skills. Submission requirements provide a supportive framework for students to work within, while there is encouragement for more confident students to reinterpret this according to the focus of their projects.

As part of one of my visits, I was able to observe several project presentations. I was impressed by the professional but relaxed atmosphere in which this process was conducted, and by the lines of questioning, which gave students opportunities to clarify aspects of their work, and to expand on key points in more detail. Students seemed well practiced at showing their work in this way.

The culture of critically reflective writing on precedents and projects, cultivated through AP and ADR, supports thoughtful and precise annotation of work, and considered verbal presentations. Learning outcomes and marking descriptors are exemplary in their clarity and, on the basis of submissions I sampled, rigorously inform assessment and feedback. Across the range of presentations I saw and submissions I reviewed, the marks awarded were in all cases very close to those I had in mind, demonstrating fairness and rigour in moderation processes.

### **4. Year-on-Year Comments**

[Previous External Examiner Reports are available from the Cardiff University Website [here](#).]

Not applicable (new programme)

**5. Preparation for the role of External Examiner (for new External Examiners only)** (appropriateness of briefing provided, visits to School, programme handbooks and supporting information)

I received a clear and comprehensive introductory presentation on my initial visit, covering the programme ethos, structure, assessments and intended learning outcomes. A full set of programme documents, including the handbook and module outlines were provided to accompany this. All are written in an accessible and precise, but also engaging style. It would, however, have been useful to have been directed to these and to have been given some benchmark samples of work in advance of the visit in order to familiarise myself with the programme. The visit day was well organised and the programme team allowed ample time for discussion and were very helpful and enthusiastic in answering questions.

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

The integration of this programme with the School's accredited MArch programme – in teaching and studio space – is an exemplary model and seems crucial to the high standard of work achieved. Sharing design units and working in parallel with MArch students is evidently experienced as a challenge for MA AD students, but also a great source of motivation and inspiration. Students appreciate this link, and feel welcome in the studio, and commented on how design tutors are very supportive of their particular endeavours. While students gain confidence from being held to the same project structure and expectations as MArch students, the additional requirements of the programme and the breadth of different teaching/assessment patterns across module options can lead to considerable additional pressures for MA AD students. As discussed above, changes to module options and the structuring of teaching activities might be considered to mitigate these issues.

The skills training in analysis in semester 1 is noteworthy as a successful way to support students from a range of undergraduate study backgrounds to become acquainted with the methods and contexts of architectural research and practice in the UK. This seems well structured through specific exercises, including on-site investigations – and the benefits of this are readily apparent in the rigorous studies undertaken in ADR. As discussed above, the scope of AP could be expanded, potentially through closer alignment with elements of modules offered from the undergraduate programme.

There could be benefits in including more exploratory techniques – such as collage, photography and film – alongside analysis, to equip students with techniques that may also help them translate ideas into more original design proposals. The module could also cultivate broader interdisciplinary research skills by linking study buildings to relevant historical interpretation and criticism, as well as texts at the intersection of architectural, cultural and social studies. This would be an opportunity for students to learn to understand architectural precedents on multiple levels, and to begin to see how this breadth of concerns – and breadth of critical reading – is relevant to their own design work. This would also bring a greater awareness of cultural and climatic specificity to the work. At present, projects can tend to imply the possibility of universal solutions, whereby precedent research is smoothly applied to somewhere with very different conditions.

Support for the development of a reflective approach is excellent, particularly through the 'reflective diary', which helps students to shape their own line of interest and to resource their thinking with appropriate architectural reference points. Again, these references might productively broaden beyond the core of architectural research to open up more critically rounded lines of enquiry. From conversations with students, there's a sense that it took them some time to feel at ease with a self-directed, open design process, and with design research being as much about questioning as problem-solving. To a large degree, this is to be expected in a learning process which inevitably takes time, but it might be possible to discuss the anxieties of this transition more directly (and to engage more with the growing body of texts on design research, e.g. by Murray Fraser et al.), perhaps as part of ADR workshops, or the AP module.

In the thesis module, there is an effective structure to guide students through the different phases of enquiry. This supports the adoption of a rigorous design research process – and is clearly a particular support to those who find the programme more challenging. But I wonder if this is, as currently set out, a bit too rigid. The titles used for each phase are, understandably, taken from the language of research more broadly, but would benefit from adaptation to a design research context which might involve more creative methods of engaging with texts and objects. In some projects, the methods undertaken, and the discoveries made along the way seemed potentially more successful (and interesting) than the final iteration of the project. Is there a way to give more recognition to this aspect of the work?

While diverse methods of analysis are in evidence, modes of representation in design seem to be accomplished, but relatively standardised, reliant on plan, section, diagram and perspective views, with a tendency to digital drawing techniques. This left most projects lacking a sense of their material and experiential qualities. A greater encouragement towards model making, prototyping, expressive pieces evoking atmosphere, such as collages etc. may loosen up the design process and allow students to reach a greater depth of understanding in their projects.

The programme's aim to tackle real world problems through credible, realistic solutions is set out forcefully in the handbook. This is clearly important to the School, and the link to a professionally accredited programme with the same values is what makes the programme distinctive. Nevertheless, I wonder if some of the MArch studio expectations might be loosened slightly, allowing ADR projects to become a more speculative springboard into research. Does research into a suitably complex problem necessarily mean designing a building of a certain scale? The requirements of the brief tend to direct students towards a single building, whereas some of the issues taken on might have been more convincingly explored through multi-scalar interventions.

This would involve more thorough questioning of the broader context, economics and politics of architectural production – dominant models of urban development, who has agency in these processes, related issues such as gentrification, and the constraints these bring to projects. In some cases, this might mean acting more tactically and rethinking the typical role of the architect, models of practice and methods of procurement. Without this, some projects risk appearing at best optimistic, at worst naïve, in the agency they assume for the architect and the benefits projects are intended to bring. I should add, however, that this is setting a high bar for a programme already covering a lot of ground and achieving very good

results; given the energies and vision invested in the it, however, I think this should be within the scope of ambition.

In the end, this may come down to clarifying where the programme sits between notions of ‘research by design’, ‘design research’, and ‘practice-based research’. All can be found at different points in the programme literature and, while overlapping in meaning, range from a broader sense which might include more speculative work, to one more circumscribed by the opportunities of professional practice. The current research skills and available units seem to stick closer to ‘practiced-based research’, which may be deliberate and most closely align with the School’s values. But without departing too far from these, I think the programme’s vision could accommodate a broader sense of design research, with a greater diversity of starting points, methods and outcomes.

Finally, I wish to highlight the noteworthy individual and collective efforts of staff. The attentiveness of core staff to students’ needs is readily apparent, and it is clear that a great deal of time is being put into cultivating the culture of the programme and making it a success. The programme tackles urgent issues of global significance and sets up a new generation of individuals to address these rigorously through a design research approach.

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

N/A

**8. 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)
<b>Programme/Course Information</b>				
8.1	Did you receive sufficient information about the Programme and its contents, learning outcomes and assessments?	Y		
8.2	Were you asked to comment on any changes to the assessment of the Programme?			N/A
<b>Draft Examination Question Papers</b>				
8.3	Were you asked to approve all examination papers contributing to the final award?			N/A
8.4	Were the nature, spread and level of the questions appropriate?			N/A
8.5	Were suitable arrangements made to consider your comments?			N/A
<b>Marking Examination Scripts</b>				
8.6	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
8.7	Was the general standard and consistency of marking appropriate?			N/A

8.8	Were the scripts marked in such a way as to enable you to see the reasons for the award of given marks?			N/A
8.9	Were you satisfied with the standard and consistency of marking applied by the internal examiners?			N/A
8.10	In your judgement, did you have the opportunity to examine a sufficient cross-section of candidates' work contributing to the final assessment?			N/A
<b>Coursework and Practical Assessments</b>				
8.11	Was the choice of subjects for coursework and / or practical assessments appropriate?	Y		
8.12	Were you afforded access to an appropriate sample of coursework and / or practical assessments?	Y		
8.13	Was the method and general standard of assessment appropriate?	Y		
8.14	Is sufficient feedback provided to students on their assessed work?	Y		
<b>Clinical Examinations (if applicable)</b>				
8.15	Were satisfactory arrangements made for the conduct of clinical assessments?			N/A
<b>Sampling of Work</b>				
8.16	Were you afforded sufficient time to consider samples of assessed work?	Y		
<b>Examining Board Meeting</b>				
8.17	Were you able to attend the Examining Board meeting?	Y		
8.18	Was the Examining Board conducted properly, in accordance with established procedures and to your satisfaction?	Y		
8.19	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		
<b>Joint Examining Board Meeting (if applicable)</b>				
8.20	Did you attend a Composite Examining Board, i.e. one convened to consider the award of Joint Honours degrees?			N/A
8.21	If so, were you made aware of the procedures and conventions for the award of Joint Honours degrees?			N/A
8.22	Was the Composite Examining Board conducted according to its rules?			N/A
<b>Examination of Master's Dissertations (if applicable)</b>				
8.23	Did you receive a sufficient number of Dissertations to be able to assess whether the internal marking and classifications were appropriate and consistent?			N/A
8.24	Was the sample in accordance with the University's sampling guidelines (guidelines provided below)?			N/A
8.25	Were you satisfied with the standard and consistency of marking applied by the Internal Examiners?			N/A
8.26	Were you able to attend the Master's Degree (Dissertation) Stage Examining Board?			N/A

8.27	If so, was the Examining Board conducted properly and in accordance with established procedures?			<b>N/A</b>
8.28	Were the schemes for marking and classification correctly applied?			<b>N/A</b>
8.29	Were the standards of the awards recommended appropriate?			<b>N/A</b>
8.30	<p><b>Comments on the Examination of Master's Dissertations.</b> <i>Please provide any comments you may wish to make on the issues raised above.</i></p> <p><b>N/A</b></p>			

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