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Sent by email to phyllidamills@millspower.com

12 March 2020

Dear Ms Mills,

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

I am writing further to the receipt of your report for BSc in Architectural Studies.

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. Throughout the School there is a range of very good studio and unit briefs offering a wide variety of exciting potential projects for the students that lead them in a structured way through projects of increasing complexity and diversity.
3. There have been some commendable developments in the structure of the history module.
4. The change in structure to offer a choice of topics in the Design Principles and Methods module.
5. The School delivers a course that is good or excellent in some parts and good or excellent in some years.
6. Good progress has been made on the recruitment of women to teaching posts and to the examination process.
7. Leadership has improved and there is more sense of esprit de corps among staff across the School.



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8. The technical lighting study in the second year allow students to creatively explore an aspect of the technical module in the context of their proposals for the design module.

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

1. **Programme Structure:** *The content of the programme does not explicitly include sustainability.*

Sustainability (environmental, economic and social) are, and have always been, a core agenda at the WSA, led by world-renowned researchers and recognised through award-winning buildings designed in-house. References to sustainability, and more specific variations of what this means, are included within our module descriptors and specific project briefs. For, example, The Module Description for AD3 Design states in Learning outcomes that students are required to '*Integrate appropriate building structure, construction, environment and services (sustainability issues included) and spatial ordering into holistic design solutions.*' In year 1 our Architectural Technology 1A module specifically introduces the notion of environmental sustainability connected to social wellbeing, while economic sustainability is introduced in year 2 design studio and the year 3 Practice Management and Economics module.

We will continue to reinforce the importance of sustainability and its many interpretations and meanings across all years, modules and design units.

2. **Programme Structure:** *The School is not yet meeting the expectations of students in the third year with regard to technology teaching.*

We have been developing the Architectural Technology 3 module and integration with design studio over the last couple of years and recognise there are areas that will benefit from further development. We are including technology within the new portfolio system introduced by the School in 2019/20 to increase integration.

We are also debating appropriate methods and learning opportunities as part of the School's current UG programme redesign that is due to launch in September 2022.

3. **Programme Structure:** *The School should consider where there are opportunities to build in more group work to the modules, so that students get experience in cooperation and negotiation.*

We appreciate that this is important and have highlighted a number of opportunities that have been built in during the academic year 2019/20 below. We will continue to monitor and take on board feedback from students, staff and examiners about further improvements.

In design during Year 3, in 2019/20 students participated in a student-led cross-crit celebration event and we encourage students to visit the crits of

other units in the School, if these do not conflict with their own crits. Timetabling sometimes hinders this but as the Bute building is currently undergoing a complete re-design this has created opportunities for informal meeting / group work / cooperation / negotiation.

We encourage group work from the start of year 1 with short projects set for students to collaborate in analysis, interrogation and design. For 2019/20 a series of workshop projects have been set in design studio, in AT1a students work in groups to measure, record and analyse historic buildings at St Fagans and in Building Through Time (BTT) students peer assess each other's work – which has been well received by the students.

In Year 2 design, students are divided into six 'studios' of around 20 students each. These groups are encouraged to conduct contextual and site analysis collectively. Many studios have group activities including primer projects at the commencement of major design projects. Additionally within Design 2, we run shorter live design projects in groups to give students the chance to build their own design teams, and work collectively on developing a piece of design work from a shared brief. This year, on the 100th anniversary of the Bauhaus, the brief was to design a chair from a materially informed starting point. Two of the teams have worked together to fabricate their designs.

In DPM3, students are encouraged to work collectively. The different electives take different approaches to collaborative working. In the 'points of contact' elective, students work in groups of 2-4 to understand and work with a material they have a shared interest in. In 'sensemod' groups of 5 are encouraged to work collectively and share skills to build pieces of responsive architecture.

In Issues in Contemporary Architecture this module is assessed with two pieces of work: 10% of an analytical group work; and a 90% 2000 words essay. Thus, 10% of the assessment is group work. For the group work, students are asked to work in groups of 4 and select a building from a given list. Then students are assessed on an 8 minutes presentation and the PPP.

4. ***Programme Structure:*** *Unit or year based teaching could be designed to give more structured understanding of how a master plan for a site/city/area/landscape showing plots, infrastructure, services, context, landscape and environment is distinct from a design proposal that fills out part of that master plan.*

We acknowledge this and will consider how to address this as part of our UG curriculum redesign.

In 2019/20, in response to comments made following design examinations in May 2019, we introduced unit-specific Learning Outcomes for the Year 3 Design module to assist in differentiating the approaches of individual

design units and to clarify the positioning of different approaches across the units to students and examiners.

In Year 2, the design projects in each studio/ tutor group are set at a neighbourhood scale to analyse wider urban strategies before proposing strategies that directly address site/ city/ area and landscapes.

5. **Programme Structure:** *Visibility of design work between studios, years, degree and masters courses is constrained; the School should seek opportunities for peer to peer learning throughout the School.*

This is acknowledged and is a key part of the School's refocusing through the WIDER-BE (Well-Informed Design Education and Research in the Built Environment). Currently we invite our MArch 2 students to provide studio support in BSc year 1, and encourage and include PhD students across all module teaching. In 2019/20 we are introducing a student MArch Dissertation conference to bring together MArch 1 and 2 students to discuss their research. We will review this to consider opening this to other years and programmes.

6. **Programme Structure:** *The quality of first year work appears to have fallen well short of previous years, despite the structure and content remaining largely the same.*

We acknowledge the quality demonstrated in the portfolio submissions from Year 1 students in 2018/19. We conducted a significant review over the summer and re-wrote the Year 1 design module learning outcomes and changed the structure and content of the design module to integrate more opportunities for students to learn, experiment and develop key skills. Alongside the design module, we have also revised the syllabus of the Design Principles and Methods 1 (DPM1) module that provides support to the Design module. We will review this again at the end of 2019/20 to ensure standards have improved and reinforce any areas identified as needing further development.

7. **Programme Structure:** *Students feel that the School is not entirely supportive of their need for facilities and skills.*

While we appreciate that some students may feel this way, our student Module Evaluation feedback and recent NSS results suggest that the majority are happy with the facilities and their skills development. In recent years we have been working directly with students (through task and finish groups) to understand the needs of the students and respond wherever possible. This has led to:

- The relocation of our MArch students back to Bute building to integrate the Architectural students in one space.
- Expansion of the number of plotters and locations for printing.
- The improvement and diversification of IT/ AV.
- The relocated and expanded workshops on the Ground floor of Bute building (opening January 2020).

- The development of our suite of Design Principles and Methods modules in years 1-3 to include more opportunities to develop skills ranging from ways of thinking and seeing, to drawing, digital and practical skills. These modules have seen further positive feedback.

Furthermore, we have made other significant changes this year aimed to improve student wellbeing, learning and experience. These include:

- Consolidating our teaching timetable to 24 teaching weeks.
- Restructuring our pastoral care processes.
- Holding more student rep meetings within year groups.
- Establishing a whole school exhibition team.
- Introduction of design portfolio submissions for all years in the School, including MArch.

8. ***Programme Structure:*** *There are still opportunities to improve integration between modules.*

We agree. The changes that were made to Design Principles and Methods in Year 3 greatly assisted in integrating this module with Design and Issues in Contemporary Architecture and we appreciate that there is more work to do to integrate Technology with other modules. This forms a critical part of our UG curriculum redesign.

9. ***Academic Standards:*** *The School has the potential to be good or excellent across the board and should now begin focus on strength in depth, and consider how it can achieve a consistently high level of course content, structure, relevance, teaching and integration across all its modules.*

The School has a focus on strength in depth and high quality across all subject areas and modules. The structure of Ateliers in Year 1, Studios in year 2 and Units in year 3 are intended to provide more specialist opportunities to develop rigorously informed projects thereby improving the diversity of subjects, a consistent structure and maintaining relevance with industry now and in the future. This is part of our ongoing UG curriculum redesign.

10. ***Academic Standards:*** *Newly set up units generally do not appear to have the clarity of method and focus that the longer running studios have generally achieved.*

We aim to revise and add new Year 3 units each year as this keeps the offer fresh for students and in touch with new developments in practice. While some 'bedding in' time may be required we feel that it is important to vary the offer for students. For Year 3 in 2018/19 there were two new units and both demonstrated clarity of method and focus. We will continue to work with our unit leaders to ensure parity across teaching and learning experience – the introduction of unit-specific learning outcomes in 2019/20 is also intended to highlight where differences lie

between units to provide greater clarity on ranging methodologies, scales and outputs.

11. **Assessment Process:** *Third year students feel they do not have a clear understanding of the criteria for marking a very well-developed small site in comparison to a less well-developed complex site. More transparency about how units can be so different and yet map onto a single set of module criteria, would benefit both students and staff.*

As above, in 2019/ 20 in response to comments made following design examinations in May 2019, we have introduced unit-specific Learning Outcomes to assist in differentiating the approaches of individual design units and to clarify the positioning of different approaches across the units to students and examiners.

12. **Assessment Process:** *It may also be beneficial to review how a research-based design unit, where the balance of research and design might be 80/20, can follow the same assessment process as a unit where research and design is 20/80.*

In 2019/20 we have introduced a new marking/ assessment whereby students in Year 3 receive an indicative 30% of their mark at the mid-term assessment point. We have also introduced an end of year portfolio submission which is intended to reflect the research element more strongly in the final examination. As above we have also introduced unit specific Learning Outcomes to assist in differentiating the approaches of individual design units and to clarify the positioning of different approaches across the units to students and examiners.

13. **Assessment Process:** *Unit specific learning outcomes were not systematically expressed nor consistently mapped to the module descriptions across the third-year unit briefs.*

Please see our responses above regarding introduction of unit specific learning outcomes aligned to the module learning outcomes.

14. **Year-on-Year Comments:** *It would be great to see more equivalent methods for explicitly embedding technical understanding in design thinking, perhaps using precedent study projects, the 'short projects' or the vertical studios as well as design projects.*

Please see response under items 1 and 2. We continue to review technical integration to ensure a balance of generalist and specialist knowledge can be learnt, tested and applied through design studio whilst ensuring we meet the ARB/ RIBA Criteria for accreditation.

The Vertical Studio, has been adjusted for 2019/ 20 in terms of timing and content – we will review this at the end of the year to appraise the changes.

15. **Year-on-Year Comments:** *The issue of not presenting both semesters' work for portfolio review in the third year continues to impede attainment, particularly in studios that rely on extensive analysis or research at scale.*

Please see response to items 7 and 12 regarding the introduction of design portfolios and a weighted indicative mark at the end of the Autumn semester to reflect research and conceptualisation stages of work.

16. **Year-on-Year Comments:** *Evidence of the desired cooperation between technical and studio tutors is not yet apparent in the third year vivas and portfolios.*

Please see response to item 2 regarding the integration of technology work within the final submitted and assessed portfolio. We will review this again at the end of the 2019/20.

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