

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

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| | For completion by External Examiner: | | |
| Name of External Examiner: | Dr Sukumar Natarajan | | |
| Home Institution / Employer of External Examiner: | University of Bath | | |
| Programme and / or Modules Covered by this Report | MArch | | |
| Academic Year / Period Covered by this Report: | 2019/20 | Date of Report: | July 10, 2020 |

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)

The programme structure is robust and coherent. It is clear that the students clearly understand the structure and how to effectively conduct their studies within it. The learning outcomes are clear, and there is strong support both structurally and pedagogically for the students to maximise their potential. The programme lead and tutors should be congratulated for their outstanding effort in challenging students intellectually whilst providing great programmatic clarity.

I am satisfied that the measures taken to mitigate against the effects of the industrial action and COVID-19 have been appropriate and has allowed the students to achieve their programme level learning outcomes.

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

I can confirm assessment is fair, consistent, rigorous and the marks awarded are an accurate reflection of the work produced. Award classifications reflect student attainment, which is in line with that expected at this level and commensurate with the work produced at other institutions. As at other institutions, there has been an unavoidable upward trend in the profile of classifications as a whole this year (i.e. more firsts and upper seconds than in previous years) due to COVID-19 related measures. This is wholly appropriate. However, the school may want to carefully reflect on the proportion of firsts awarded in future years, given that this was already on an upward trend before COVID-19. This is a precautionary rather than a cautionary comment, as it is clear that the overall quality of student work is excellent.

Scaling was not used for the programme I am involved with. However, an abridged version of the safety net policy was applied due to PSRB requirements, which was, again, wholly appropriate. I have no concerns in this regard.

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

The introduced assessment variations (e.g. change in the submission format) did not affect the ability to test learning outcomes. It is clear that support was available, where needed, and that every effort was made to ensure students were not disadvantaged as a result of the changes introduced.

The use of the full marking scale is noteworthy and should be continued.

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

I received a sample of dissertations and, having gone through them all carefully, can confirm that the marking is broadly appropriate, and the work produced by the students matches the standards required at this level. It is clear that suggestions for improvements to the process from previous years, such as providing a clear pathway for different types of research methods via the handbook, have been implemented successfully.

A minor suggestion for further improvement in this area would be to examine methods by which well-defined but more challenging topics (e.g. those tackling architectural theory) are rewarded as much as topics with a more straightforward research pathway (e.g. those conducting research using survey-based methods). A possible way to tackle this is might be to test the latter for rigour. Again, this is only a very minor observation from the sample I have seen. The broader marking practice, as I have noted, is rigorous and fair.

The introduction of the conference is an excellent idea, and should be continued, ideally as a mandatory activity for all students. There were also suggestions from the students that the conference being at the end of Y4 would be positive. This could be considered, time and resources permitting, in discussion with the student body, as appropriate. Attendance of Y3 students at the conference would be good preparation for their move to Y4, not just for those remaining at Cardiff, but those who choose to move to other institutions.

5. Year-on-Year Comments

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

As noted above, it is clear that the school has been very agile in responding to comments from the external examiners. The opportunity to now view the whole programme, as opposed to only the dissertation, is welcome and provides greater clarity on the student and programme profile than previously.

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)

NA

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

As I noted earlier, I am impressed by the manner in which students are given an excellent framework for conducting their design and research work, whilst allowing considerable space for individual exploration and freedom. This is a hard to achieve balance that the programme team should be commended for, given especially, the challenges emanating from having to adjust to COVID-19.

Looking forward, my main suggestion would be to explore ways in which inter-unit interaction can be enhanced within the Design Thesis module. The lack of serendipitous interaction that is facilitated by physical co-location can potentially be mitigated through mandating weekly “posts” of work in a suitable online forum and timetabling their perusal. This seems to have already been pursued by individual units, though with varying degrees of success. The precise form of this should be given careful consideration, and with student buy-in, so that they feel they can post “work in progress” as opposed to carefully curated content, a pressure many of them shared this year.

Finally, I would stress the continued need to protect the student learning experience through periodic interaction with practising professionals – an aspect that is a strength of the programme and part of the QAA benchmark statement (Design Project 2.9).

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. Consider the impact of historical effects, as well as the impact of the current crisis, on degree classifications.
2. Consider whether the dissertation grading scheme needs alteration to balance challenging dissertation topics against more methodologically straightforward topics.
3. Make conference presentation mandatory and possibly expose earlier years to the conference.
4. Explore means of improving inter-unit interaction in the design thesis.
5. Ensure student experience is protected through continued interaction with industry and practice.