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**Sent by email to [mas58@cam.ac.uk](mailto:mas58@cam.ac.uk)**

**28 July 2017**

Dear Ms Steane,

**Re: Institutional Response: External Examiner Annual Report 2016–2017**

I am writing further to the receipt of your External Examiner's Report for the MArch (dissertations).

Your Report has been considered by the School in accordance with our approved procedures. I am, therefore, now in a position to respond on behalf of the Vice-Chancellor to the main points you had raised.

**Issues Highlighted**

1. The suggested introduction of an alternative thesis model and of further discussion on the applicability of different methodologies to different research area during both introductory guidance sessions, and subsequent reviews of progress.
2. Some upper middle ranking work lacks topicality/originality as regards the research areas/questions.
3. Suggested enhancements to arrangements for internal moderation and student vivas.
4. Lack of a timetable of External Examining tasks in advance of your visit.
5. The suggested provision, at the start of External Examiner visits, of a summary of how the School has responded to previous comments.
6. The suggested provision of key information on the MArch programme within the guidance document for the MArch Dissertation.

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7. The suggested scheduling of an event for students to outline their research projects to stimulate useful intra-unit discussion.
8. Provision of assessment feedback from the internal examiners.

**The following response has been provided on behalf of the School:**

1. Since the 2016 version of the Handbook sent to the Examiners, there have been further amendments incorporated in the 2017 version (now Guide to Research Preparation and Dissertation), which have further reduced any prescriptiveness. In particular, Section 9 on dissertation structure does away with the more rigid aspects of the suggested model structure, emphasising the intellectual and creative struggle involved in bringing ideas to order. The External Examiners will receive a copy of the 2018 version in good time, and this will include further revisions in the light of current comments.

To address the question of methodologies, the School has initiated a series of lectures on the theme, ranging from architectural science and social sciences to history/theory. These are aimed at Postgraduate Research and Taught Masters students as well as March Dissertation students, and the lectures have been made available online. The lectures were not well attended by Dissertation students this year, doubtless because they took place rather late for them, but it is hoped that the new cohort will benefit from the online availability.

2. There are two strands to points raised by External Examiners about originality, the first concerning assessment criteria. While the School believes that it does regularly reward originality in its assessments, the written criteria suggest this only for the very highest marks and this should be reviewed. It should be made clear that originality is valued both in the sense of novelty and going beyond conventions, and in the sense (desirable but not expected in this dissertation) of an 'original contribution' as required by a research degree.

The other issue concerns topics and approaches. The School believes that its attempt to build on the research interests and strengths of staff in the School, introduced last year via staff statements in the Handbook, has been beneficial, and should be continued for the time being. This should help to stimulate a rich variety of topics and approaches, and certainly not stifle it. The School will try to encourage an openness to different possibilities in our introductory talks to students and in staff briefings. If External Examiners are able to share good examples of topical/original themes or dissertations, this would be much appreciated.

3. The School has conducted a thorough review of the assessment and examination procedures and are proposing the following, subject to approval by the Board of Studies:

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- All dissertations are to be double-marked, by the supervisor (first marker) and by one other staff member (second marker). Each fill in a feedback sheet, and they will agree a mark. If they cannot agree on a mark, their respective proposed marks will be noted.

- An internal moderation panel (4 or 5 members, chaired by Module Leader) will consider low and high marks, determine a final mark where internal examiners have been unable to agree, come to an overview of the marking and make any necessary adjustments in the light of it.

- As currently there will be four External Examiners. Each will review a quarter of the dissertations. They will be provided with the internals' feedback sheets and the moderated marks in advance of the vivas.

- The External Examiners will participate in the viva process, offering the students the chance to present to well-regarded subject specialists from other schools. Marks may be adjusted by a small percentage [to be discussed further] purely in the light of a student's performance at the viva.

- In accordance with the University's requirements, the External Examiners will comment on the thoroughness and fairness of the examination process, the academic standards and the marking levels, but they are not able to alter individual marks.

- The School's internal moderation panel will convene briefly after the vivas to address any issues relating to marks that may have arisen during the vivas.

4. This will be rectified next year.
5. This written response will be supplemented next year by an update at the start of the External Examiners' visit.
6. This will be incorporated in the next version of the Guide, for easy reference.
7. This will have resourcing implications, but the School will consider the possibilities for some kind of workshop or discussion event for MArch 2 students early in the Autumn term.
8. This was an oversight this year, and next year External Examiners will be provided with feedback sheets from both examiners, and the moderated mark (see above).

**The University is pleased to note your positive comments including:**

1. the organisation of your visit;
2. most of the students display an enjoyable enthusiasm and thoughtfulness in commenting on the aspirations behind - and insights of - their research.

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I hope that you will find this response satisfactory and we thank you for your continued support of the programme.

As this is your final year as External Examiner, we would like to thank you for your service and we are most grateful for your valuable input into this process.

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 website and will be available to all students and staff.

The University's provision of the formal Institutional Response is not intended to constrain direct communication between schools and their External Examiners. Schools are encouraged to discuss with their External Examiners any matters of detail raised in their Reports and, more widely, any issues impacting on the quality and standards of awards, including possible changes to programmes.

We are most grateful for your comments and for your support in this matter.

Yours sincerely,



Mr Simon Wright  
Academic Registrar