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Sent by email to Dr Samuel Austin

24 June 2019

Dear Dr Austin,

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

I am writing further to the receipt of your report for the MA Architectural Design.

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 and response provided by the School:

1. *The range of interests opened up to students seems relatively limited at present, and it would be good to see greater diversity as the programme matures.*

We agree with the examiner's comments here. As the programme grows, it will provide us with opportunities to develop a broader range of design units. This current academic year 2018-19, the three units have a greater diversity of themes and methods. For next Academic year 2019-20, the aim is to have 6-7 Units that will cover a broader range of design research themes, such as collaborative design, intercultural social inclusion, performative art and architectural design, parametric design, environmental design and critical approaches to contemporary intervention in heritage contexts.

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2. *The role of the Architectural Design and Research module as springboard for the Design Thesis could be made clearer to students in documentation.*

This is something that we are already undertaking. During the current academic year, we have run a series of additional workshops to help students use the ADR module to support their Design Thesis, clarifying the articulation between the two modules. We will take time to review our documentation to ensure that this connection is made clear.

3. *The Analysis of Precedents module could do more to introduce more diverse techniques and critical lenses, perhaps under a broader title of Tools/Methods for Design Research.*

This is something that we have been covering under the Architectural Design and Research Module with the help of the aforementioned workshops. Nevertheless we annually review the workshops conducted as part of the Analysis of Precedent module and will consider this for the next academic session.

4. *Greater guidance on suitability of optional modules combinations with prior knowledge/skill requirements would be beneficial to students.*

We are looking to improve how we communicate the choice and scope of optional modules to students via programme handbooks. Going forward our aim is to issue details of optional modules prior to arrival at the school. We are also reviewing our module descriptions for all of our post-graduate modules and will ensure that they clearly communicate the module requirements. Necessary pre-requisite skills for undertaking each optional module will be included in the module catalogue for the information of the students.

5. *Consider making the Issues in Contemporary Architecture compulsory, or integrating some of its content into an expanded research skills module.*

We agree that there is potential for a stronger understanding of contemporary architectural issues across the whole of the programme. At the moment this might be best achieved by closer integration within the existing core modules, rather than reducing the scope for optional modules within the programme.

6. *Certain combinations of specialist modules from other programmes can make the first semester very intense, leading to a higher fails. The compatibility of some of these modules with the programme should be considered, or a shift of focus to foundational modules in semester one, with more specialist options offered in semester two.*

We note the comments here and have reviewed which modules are offered as optional modules to address this concern. However, there are limits as the optional modules are all co-taught with other programmes. Furthermore, we are aware of the need to avoid overloading students during the latter part of the spring semester as the students' design projects and their associated design research are reaching a higher degree of complexity and definition, thus requiring an intense work by the students.

7. *Students' projects tend to default to relatively predictable solutions, with outputs broadly similar in approach and representational methods. It would be worth encouraging a greater diversity of starting points and methods in projects, leading to more distinctive outputs.*

This we anticipate will be addressed as we are able to offer a broader range of units. We recognise that students do not always use the full range of representational approaches, often defaulting to using Computer Aided Design drawings over more exploratory approaches. In some cases this appears to be a result of a strong steer given during the students' education prior to arriving at Cardiff and students appear to lack confidence in being more experimental in approach. This is something that we are looking to address as part of the student's induction as well as through the on-going support that we provide and the workshops on representation techniques we are offering.

8. *It would have been useful to have been provided with programme and module documents and some benchmark examples of work prior to the initial School visit.*

We will provide this in future years. During the current Academic year, we've already addressed this as the External Examiner got this information prior to his School visit.

9. *Consider directly addressing potential anxieties of student transition to self-directed, open design process through core module workshops.*

As mentioned under point 7, we will address this as part of the student induction as well as through core module workshops. The explanation of the self-directed design research process has been improved in the year meetings, with the opportunity of the students addressing queries on this matter.

10. *The structure of the thesis module may be too rigid, and would benefit from adaptation to a design research context which might involve more creative methods of engaging with texts and objects.*

The richness of design research approaches from the different design Units and the involvement of all the Unit leaders as dissertation supervisors of the Design Thesis module has provided different themes, and more creative approaches and methods to design-research.

11. *Consider if some of the MArch studio expectations might be loosened slightly, allowing ADR projects to become a more speculative springboard into research.*

Whilst our initial intention was to run joint units for M.Arch and MAAD, this proved to be problematic, given that the studio expectations varied between the two programmes. As a result this year, we have run separate units for the MAAD and M.Arch programmes, but with an intention of holding shared reviews and other events between the units on the different programmes. This is something we are currently exploring together with the M.Arch 2 chair for the Academic year 2019-2020.

12. *The programme's vision could accommodate a broader sense of design research, with a greater diversity of starting points, methods and outcomes.*

The varied approaches on design research have been further explored within the different units, in the common workshops to all units and in the referred year meetings.

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 positive and supportive atmosphere cultivated by staff.
3. The opportunity to pursue a single thematic area of enquiry across all three semesters is highly distinctive.
4. Learning outcomes and marking descriptors are exemplary in their clarity and inform assessment and feedback.
5. The integration of this programme with the School's accredited M.Arch programme – in teaching and studio space – is an exemplary model and seems crucial to the high standard of work achieved.
6. The skills training in analysis in semester one successfully supports students from a range of undergraduate study backgrounds to become acquainted with the methods and contexts of architectural research and practice in the UK.
7. Support for the development of a reflective approach is excellent, particularly through the 'reflective diary'.
8. 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.

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