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Sent by email to Dr Sukumar Natarajan

13 January 2020

Dear Dr Natarajan,

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

I am writing further to the receipt of your report for MArch Dissertations.

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. Students have access to a good pool of supervision talent and expertise.
3. The changes made this year to the structure and format of the assessment procedure and the role of the externals, in response to the comments made by the examiners last year, have been very welcome.
4. The rigour brought to the marking process through the use of a double marking system followed by a viva is excellent.
5. Improvements in support to students in terms of research methods and practice has paid clear dividends and should be continued.

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

1. ***Master's Dissertations:*** Consider a differentiated marking framework for research that is more qualitative / subjective / exploratory / personal /



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experiential in nature from that which is more quantitative / scientific / objective.

The issue of parity in marking very different forms of research is indeed a challenge. Introducing a differentiated marking framework would certainly resolve some of these issues, but we foresee some hurdles to this – student expectations regarding marking, and a possible unintended encouragement towards forms of dissertation that are more discursive than research-based. Overall, we are responding to this challenge via (1) a marking table guide distributed to students and supervisors to establish parities; (2) clarity of expectations (e.g. less emphasis on ‘subjectivity’ and avoidance of ‘opinion’ pieces yet support for critical analysis) conveyed through the reshaped preparatory Research Preparation module; (3) a clear guidance to markers that dissertations that fall short of new knowledge, whether via original argument or original empirical material, can be rewarded at best a high 60s (in cases in which the work demonstrates an in-depth understanding of the material yet resembles an ‘essay’ rather than a research piece).

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