

## EXTERNAL EXAMINER ANNUAL REPORT FORM

Guidance notes are available to support the completion of this Report and are available at <http://learning.cf.ac.uk/quality/review/external-examiners/reports/>.

	For completion by External Examiner:		
Name of External Examiner:	Eoghan Mortell FCIPR		
Home Institution / Employer of External Examiner:	Cara Communications		
Programme and / or Subjects Covered by this Report	MA International Public Relations and Global Communications Management		
Academic Year / Period Covered by this Report:	2018/19	Date of Report:	14 <sup>th</sup> November 2019

For completion by External Examiner in the spaces provided. Please extend spaces where necessary. **Please note this Form will be published online and should not make any reference to any individual students or members of staff.**

### 1. Programme Structure

The programme is comprehensive and well designed to meet the needs of those seeking to enter, or progress within, the communications industry. It has been constructed in a balanced way with the needs of the industry very much in mind and it seeks to give students a thorough grasp both of core theory and key practical skills.

The different elements of the programme are mutually supportive and the emphasis on quality research – data gathering, interpretation and application – underpins other important sections of the programme, particularly the dissertation.

The programme caters for a diverse group of students from very different cultural backgrounds but succeeds in equipping them with common skills and insights which will stand them in good stead within their respective future operating environments. Moreover, in my opinion, the programme is relevant across most, if not all sectors, whether industrial, retail, entertainment, education, health, public services or voluntary bodies and NGOs. It was very interesting to read high calibre submissions from students whose career aspirations are focused on these many different fields.

The programme has evolved over recent years to take account of the changing communications landscape and the proliferation of communications channels, particularly online platforms.

The increasing emphasis on developing reliable performance indicators and metrics to measure the effectiveness and success of communications programmes has been noted and welcomed. The ability to demonstrate and prove the effectiveness of communications activity is something demanded increasingly within the industry. In addition to the solid academic and theoretical content of the MA programme, many practical skills have been built into the modules and this element appears to be growing year-on-year. This is a direction of travel I personally would encourage as these students need to be job-ready when they enter the workplace and able to satisfy employers who will judge them initially on their operational effectiveness more than their longer-term potential to make a higher-level strategic input to the business. In that respect I would suggest that giving even more attention to media writing skills, media relationship building, wider networking and stronger news awareness would be valuable for the programme. In this context, I'm aware of the MA programme's mutually supportive links with the School of Journalism and would urge that this is developed further to achieve the aims above. In terms of media relationships it would be helpful for students to develop skills such as understanding news cycles, tracking particular journalists' current topics of interest, plugging clients in to running stories and monitoring/interacting with journalists who use their online platforms to complement their stories on mainstream channels in order to stimulate further news and comment. Additional focus within the programme on practical crisis communications and reputation protection would also be welcome. As stated previously, the explicit link made by module leaders between course content and resulting employability skills is a valuable aspect of the programme that focuses minds firmly upon the purpose of the learning.

The practice of involving external 'clients' to enable students to create live digital campaigns has continued to be developed, and feedback from these 'clients' is now established as part of the marking process. This gives the students the discipline of finding solutions to real challenges and being judged to some extent on actual rather than theoretical outcomes.

One element that could be emphasised further is that of applying appropriate budgets to campaigns. This financial element has certainly been introduced to the course in the past two years and I'd welcome its continued development, as it's essential that communications professionals have the ability to cost programmes accurately – including the 'costing' of their own time - and can deliver within fixed budgets, both large and small.

## **2. Academic Standards**

Having reviewed a representative cross section of the work, and studied comments from first and second markers, I am impressed by the rigour of the academic standards applied to the programme and by the high quality and relevance of most of the work submitted. Module leaders have obviously promoted to their students the importance of clarity of focus in their submissions and proper substantiation of any assertions made or justification of methods chosen and, moreover, have been resolute in refusing to pass work that is below master's standard. Furthermore, I'm content that students have been required to demonstrate clearly that they have grasped core theory and are able to apply it coherently and effectively in a campaign context.

Markers invariably insisted on students showing the relevance of their observations and arguments to professional communications practice and have consistently penalised work that strayed from this or lost focus. There were a higher than usual number of fails in certain modules – specifically public relations practice

and international public relations theory – but, having reviewed all of the submissions concerned, I'm satisfied the markers were upholding acceptable standards in reaching these conclusions. (I will refer further to this below). Language skills continue to be an issue with some students whose mother tongue is perhaps quite different to English. In cases where weak written-English skills have hindered a student's progress, I wonder whether the language support provided by the university can realistically achieve sufficient improvement in the timescale necessary. The solution to this probably lies in tighter screening of applicants to ensure their English skills are strong enough before admitting them to the programme in the first place.

One area where I think higher standards could be applied is in the realm of news writing and developing news angles. Markers were perhaps unduly generous in their assessment of press releases that didn't really contain news value and would, in reality, not have achieved much coverage in mainstream media. Markers emphasised the importance of storytelling as being central to effective communication and, in my view, rigorous news writing is central to good storytelling.

### **3. The Assessment Process**

I had the opportunity to review a good cross-section of papers under every module, along with all failed submissions and am satisfied by the consistency of marking.

Most, though not all, markers used the grademark report, which allowed comments to be made on specific parts of the submitted text and this was helpful in understanding the markers' approach to assessment. On the whole, markers were clear in their feedback, explaining to candidates what had gained or lost them marks and ultimately what determined their final score. Failures were generally due to candidates not addressing the set question – and effectively addressing a different imagined question - or not using the guidance given in lectures. Some module leaders sought to pre-empt this by distributing very explicit notes on how assignments should be approached but not all students took this on board. Among the fails there were a very small number of suspected plagiarism cases, and these were submitted for full investigation.

Feedback on submissions was as constructive as possible and typically it pointed candidates towards ways in which their submissions could be improved. As in the past, the overwhelming majority of submissions scored in the 60-80 range with only the IPR Theory law assignment and the group presentation in Research Methods 1 showing significant numbers above 80. I have noted above those modules in which a higher-than-usual number of fails occurred but, in those cases, the assessment process appeared to be completely fair and those who failed would have understood from the feedback why they fell short of a pass. One second marker, in noting a drop in distinctions achieved in a particular module, referred explicitly to some students' reluctance to avail of help and support readily on offer from staff. The availability of this support is something staff can only continue to emphasise but, ultimately, it is the individual student's choice.

#### **4. Year-on-Year Comments**

I feel there has been further progress in programme's focus on the practical, operational skills needed to make students job-ready upon completion of the course. Requiring students to respond to a brief and write a viable proposal is a good discipline which I believe has evolved further over the past year. I'm pleased to see this feature as a key element of the programme, given the competitive industry environment students will inevitably face. (If relevant permissions could be secured, it might be helpful if students were given anonymised access to examples of successful and unsuccessful bid documents from industry or public sector to aid their understanding of how such documents tend to be judged in the field).

The introduction of a professional practice module to the programme is also very welcome as it encourages aspiring PR practitioners to develop the same mindset as those in other longer-established professions; ie encouragement to reflect constantly on their professional practice and systematically develop their skillset and capabilities. Getting students to sell themselves as an exercise within this module is another welcome addition to the programme given that one's own personality, attributes and achievements constitute the 'brand' an individual should know best of all and should be able to communicate most powerfully.

As referred to above, I was pleased to see that the feedback from external 'clients' now counts towards the final mark in the digital communications module. Some excellent campaigns were delivered, drawing fulsome praise from the clients concerned. Ideally, I'd like to see a wider spectrum of 'clients' recruited to this element of the programme; perhaps including manufacturers and professional service providers alongside the not-for-profit and micro businesses who currently participate. However, I appreciate it may be harder to persuade such entities, who are typically larger and more protective of their brands, to cooperate in allowing a live campaign on their behalf.

Judging by the names on the mark sheets I sense that the composition of the cohort is becoming more diverse, whereas it had previously been dominated by British and Chinese students. Naturally this provides a wider range of cultural perspectives on communication which is hopefully enriching for all involved.

#### **5. Preparation / Induction Activity (for new External Examiners only)**

N/A

#### **6. Noteworthy Practice and Enhancement**

The most significant elements of noteworthy practice and added-value remain as before:

1. High quality module handbooks giving students clear perspective from the outset of what they should be seeking to achieve during their master's programme
2. High calibre, relevant speakers from the PR industry and related sectors, enabling students to connect their learning to professional practice and to contemporary developments in the industry.
3. Strong focus on employability skills which is growing year-on-year

4. Mutually supportive elements of the programme delivered in an order that optimises their value – eg research skills grounding that feeds into assignment and dissertation requirements
5. Work placements with a broad spectrum of consultancies and organisations

**7. Comments on the Examination of Master’s Dissertations (External Examiners for postgraduate Master’s Programmes only, see also 9.23-9.29 below)**

Not applicable

**8. Appointment Overview (for retiring External Examiners only)**

As I will be stepping down after the dissertation stage, I would make the brief observation that it has been a professionally enriching experience to work with the dedicated and highly-professional academic team at Cardiff who are committed to evolving their master’s programme in line with the fast-changing international communications industry and consequently are giving that industry many high-quality new practitioners each year, capable of outstanding work. The programme leaders have always been very supportive and generous with their time in providing supplementary information and context to help with external examiner assessment and the administration team have provided much-valued practical support. The institutional response to external examiner reports has always been constructive, and relevant points have been taken on board with a view to adapting aspects of the programme.

**9. Annual Report Checklist**

Please include appropriate comments within Sections 1-8 above for any answer of ‘No’.

		Yes (Y)	No (N)	N/A (N/A)
<b>Programme/Course Information</b>				
9.1	Did you receive sufficient information about the Programme and its contents, learning outcomes and assessments?	Y		
9.2	Were you asked to comment on any changes to the assessment of the Programme?		N	
<b>Draft Examination Question Papers</b>				
9.3	Were you asked to approve all examination papers contributing to the final award?		N	
9.4	Were the nature, spread and level of the questions appropriate?			N/A
9.5	Were suitable arrangements made to consider your comments?			N/A
<b>Marking Examination Scripts</b>				
9.6	Did you receive a sufficient number of scripts to be able to assess whether the internal marking and classifications were appropriate and consistent?	Y		
9.7	Was the general standard and consistency of marking appropriate?	Y		

		Yes (Y)	No (N)	N/A (N/A)
9.8	Were the scripts marked in such a way as to enable you to see the reasons for the award of given marks?	Y		
9.9	Were you satisfied with the standard and consistency of marking applied by the internal examiners?	Y		
9.10	In your judgement, did you have the opportunity to examine a sufficient cross-section of candidates' work contributing to the final assessment?	Y		
<b>Coursework and Practical Assessments</b>				
9.11	Was the choice of subjects for coursework and / or practical assessments appropriate?	Y		
9.12	Were you afforded access to an appropriate sample of coursework and / or practical assessments?	Y		
9.13	Was the method and general standard of assessment appropriate?	Y		
9.14	Is sufficient feedback provided to students on their assessed work?	Y		
<b>Clinical Examinations (if applicable)</b>				
9.15	Were satisfactory arrangements made for the conduct of clinical assessments?			N/A
<b>Sampling of Work</b>				
9.16	Were you afforded sufficient time to consider samples of assessed work?	Y		
<b>Examining Board Meeting</b>				
9.17	Were you able to attend the Examining Board meeting?		N	
9.18	Was the Examining Board conducted properly, in accordance with established procedures and to your satisfaction?			N/A
9.19	Cardiff University recognises the productive contribution of External Examiners to the assessment process and, in particular, to the work of the Examining Board. Have you had adequate opportunities to discuss the Programme and any outstanding concerns with the Examining Board or its officers?	Y		
<b>Joint Examining Board Meeting (if applicable)</b>				
9.20	Did you attend a Composite Examining Board, i.e. one convened to consider the award of Joint Honours degrees?			N/A
9.21	If so, were you made aware of the procedures and conventions for the award of Joint Honours degrees?			N/A
9.22	Was the Composite Examining Board conducted according to its rules?			N/A
<b>Examination of Master's Dissertations (if applicable)</b>				
9.23	Did you receive a sufficient number of Dissertations to be able to assess whether the internal marking and classifications were appropriate and consistent?			N/A
9.24	Was the sample in accordance with the University's sampling guidelines (guidelines provided below)?			N/A

		Yes (Y)	No (N)	N/A (N/A)
9.25	Were you satisfied with the standard and consistency of marking applied by the Internal Examiners?			N/A
9.26	Were you able to attend the Master's Degree (Dissertation) Stage Examining Board?			N/A
9.27	If so, was the Examining Board conducted properly and in accordance with established procedures?			N/A
9.28	Were the schemes for marking and classification correctly applied?			N/A
9.29	Were the standards of the awards recommended appropriate?			N/A

Please return this Report, preferably in a Microsoft Word format, by email to:

[ExternalExaminers@cf.ac.uk](mailto:ExternalExaminers@cf.ac.uk)

Your fee and expenses claim form and receipts, should be sent electronically to the above email address or in hard copy to:

External Examiners, Registry, Cardiff University, McKenzie House, 30-36 Newport Road, Cardiff, CF24 0DE

#### **SAMPLING OF TAUGHT MASTER'S DISSERTATIONS BY EXTERNAL EXAMINERS**

External Examiners shall be expected to see prescribed numbers and ranges of Dissertations, but not to mark them, on the following basis:

At least 10% of Dissertations for a postgraduate taught Master's Programme, or a minimum of 10 (whichever is the higher figure) must be seen by the External Examiner(s). Where the total number is less than 10, all Dissertations must be seen by the External Examiner(s) #.

Dissertations seen by External Examiners should include examples from across the whole range of achievement (i.e. Pass with Distinction, Pass, Fail).

External Examiners will retain the right to see other Dissertations at random.

# Where more than one External Examiner is appointed on a Programme, at least 10% of Dissertations, or a minimum of 10 (whichever is the higher figure), should be seen collectively by the External Examiners.