

INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE: EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT 2013-2014 - Master of Architecture

Dear Professor Porter,

I am writing further to your External Examiner's report for the above programme(s). Your Report has been considered by the Welsh School of Architecture 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

Your Report raised issue(s) which have been referred for consideration by the School. The following response has been provided on behalf of the School.

"1. [2] the External Examiner's detailed comments on the structure of the MArch programme

We are in the process of undertaking a course review which will involve looking at the quality and structure of the education provided through the M.Arch. In the academic year of 2014-2015, we are addressing the issue by fine-tuning the structure of briefings and submissions, with the aim of providing students with as much time as is feasible to develop their design thesis. We are doing this, for example, by pulling back the deadline for submitting the dissertation in M.Arch 2 and also by introducing it earlier in the M.Arch 1. There is also a more generous budget this year to help us to provide more in M.Arch2 year by way of consultancies, workshops, tutorials and seminars designed to assist in overcoming the challenges of the four year full-time design training.

2. [2] the report of student "concerns over the variability of their experience during [the year-out]"

This is a point we take seriously, and has been a particular issue during the economic downturn. We will be reviewing the entire M.Arch degree, particularly looking at how we can minimise risks to the academic work of students working in practices that are less supportive than they might be.

3. [3, final para] the indication that "it would be helpful to get a clearer idea of the work being examined in the undergraduate programme"

This can be scheduled into the external examiner timetable for next year.

4. [6, final para] the suggestion that the School might seek to "define more clearly what constitutes a 'design thesis' as against 'a design project'" and related comments and suggestions

We are doing this in this year at the level of each unit, by asking unit leaders to outline an initial proposition which design-based research can explore, develop and test. Unit leaders have also been asked to provide a set of learning outcomes that respond to RIBA/ ARB criteria and which are at the same time bespoke for each unit. We also provide greater clarity this year about the substance of a design thesis in a 'wsa M.Arch Handbook' which is available to students in both years of the programme. We are rewriting the brief for the 'apologia' or equivalent document which students should use to outline their thesis in terms of research questions, a conceptual framework and research methodology that relates to a choice of site, programme and technical development. The 'apologia' will, in effect, take the form of a written abstract, potentially accompanied with a key drawing from the project. We

are also encouraging more connection between the design units and established research areas and expertise within the School.”

Positive Comments

The School and University are pleased to note your positive comments on the School's provision including:

- a. [1, 2 and 3] your positive indications regarding the programme structure, academic standards and assessment process;**
- b. [6] your report that “The quality was high, the students bright and engaged, and very well taught by excellent staff”.**

I hope that you will find this response satisfactory and thank you for your service as External Examiner.

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 Registry web pages and will be available publically.

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.

Dr S L Williamson

for Dr C B Turner
Academic Registrar