CARDIFF UNIVERSITY
PRIFYSGOL CAERDYDD

Academic & Student Support Services
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Simon Wright LLB(Hons)

Sent by email to Dr Rachel Sara

13 January 2020

Dear Dr Sara,

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

I am writing further to the receipt of your report for MArch (Design).

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. The first year with students working in practice and undertaking university modules is an interesting and successful approach, and there are strong results from the increased challenge to students in this year.
3. The Research through Design year allows a strong focus on the final year studio thesis, with potential to be theoretically underpinned by research undertaken in the dissertation.
4. The excellent variety of studio units, and the exciting long-term partnership with Grangetown.
5. Craft and materiality driving two units, which allowed an exploration into making that beautifully informed some of the project proposals and brought a very developed tectonic exploration to the exhibition.
6. The issue of student well-being having been dealt with from last year.
7. The unit-specific assessment criteria interpretations continues to be excellent practice and gives clarity to the way in which parity can be demonstrated between units.

8. The variety and energy of each of the units is excellent, and the overall standard of student work is very high.
9. The studio examination process is noteworthy in the sense of occasion afforded the final examination and the opportunities for students to share their work with inspirational practitioners from around the country, and the specific focus on the technical component is excellent.

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

1. ***Programme Structure:*** *The need for a more structured induction and opportunities for networking.*

    We have been reviewing and adjusting the induction activities and integration with the first short course of our MArch 1 to ensure that both our continuing students and direct entry students are welcomed and integrated into the University, School and programme. Specific events have been scheduled and well attended in this current year to provide extra information to new students as well as holding joint academic and social activities to improve the MArch community.

    In 2019/20 we have introduced an MArch dissertation Conference timed to coincide with the assessment of the dissertations and the 2nd MArch 2 short course. Both MArch 1 and 2 students will attend the conference to listen to and engage with research presentations from all MArch 2 students clustered under themes. This will provide an opportunity for social interaction between the 2 years, but also opportunities for MArch 1 students, starting the Research Preparation module, to find out more about the final dissertations and talk top those with potentially similar interests. In future years we are considering expanding the conference to include presentations on the Design Thesis.

    In MArch 2 we have introduced more year meetings and continue to expand the number of supporting lectures to provide opportunities for cross-unit interaction and networking.

2. **Programme Structure:** *Whether the practice management module should be located in the first year (in practice) so that opportunities to connect to real-life practice environments be exploited.*

    We acknowledge the benefits that our MArch 1 year in practice has to develop the professional practice management knowledge and skills. Our MArch programme has 'practice management and economics' (PME) integrated into both years 1 and 2. In MArch 1 PME is incorporated into 2 modules: Design in Practice with a requirement to follow the RIBA workstages throughout structured design stages and a specific module component to *Prepare* and *present* a simple feasibility study taking into account *informed estimates of* construction costs, running costs and revenues; and Reflective Practice that requires students to Critically

appraise their work place in comparison with those of their peers and with commended good practice in terms of:

- key practices carried out (including relevant codes and standards);
- the approaches to the management and organization of the office;
- the different roles and approaches of members of an office team;
- the documentation of production information.

3. **Programme Structure:** *Why the 'free' unit or equivalent from last year was not repeated*

We acknowledge the benefits of the 'free' unit (Unit X) from 2017/18, however it was not run this year as we did not have any proposals from students that were rigorous enough to meet the MArch and RIBA/ ARB Part 2 standards. We are still open to running this unit in the future should appropriate proposals and supervisors be available.

4. **Programme Structure:** *Fewer models being made in some of the studios and whether it is worth exploring options to counter this tendency next year.*

We acknowledge the tendency for some units to produce less physical models. This is based on the limited budgets that each unit has for essential costs (such as model making, prototyping, in-depth community engagement, specific study trips, etc). Cardiff University asks that any costs that are regarded as essential to the students' academic work be covered, therefore unit leaders make the decision on what they regard as essential for each unit. We are working on improving this, by asking unit leaders to reconsider how they emphasise essential costs to allow for model making budgets and to promote less expensive model making opportunities to students where students may take this cost on themselves as a non-essential study.

5. **The Assessment Process:** *The particularly high number of extensions, the perceived fairness if a significant group of students are given more time in which to complete, and the need to explore the implication of this both for the external examining process and how to incentivise students to complete in the 'standard' time.*

We acknowledge a tendency for some students to take advantage of the 2-week extension period that was provided to assist students who had legitimate extenuating circumstances which would have avoided them continuing until the August re-sit date and thereby missing graduation with the rest of their cohort. As part of a wider revision of our academic timetable across both the BSc and MArch, we have now removed this 2-week extension period on the basis that we are reducing some of the pressures the students were under and therefore the tendency to apply for an extension on evidenced stress/ anxiety grounds. We will review the success of this again at the end of 2019/20.

6.   **The Assessment Process:** *The proportion of students gaining 2:2 and third class degrees is particularly small.*

    We are aware of the slight increase in 1st class and reduction in 2:2 classifications in 2018/19, however we are not concerned about this within the context of the numbers over the last 5 years. We will continue to monitor this and ensure that all awards meet the required QAA standard.

7.   **The Assessment Process:** *The possibility of sharing with students the process of assessment and moderation as they still seem to be unclear about the moderation process that goes on.*

    The processes for assessment and moderation are explained to the students in both MArch 1 and 2 at the start of each year and then at regular intervals throughout the years. In MArch 1, there is an extensive assessment matrix available on Learning Central that the students can see to know the weighting of each module and component and how marks have been derived using assessment criteria connected to Learning Outcomes.

    In MArch 2, each unit has specific learning outcomes aligned to the overall module learning outcomes which are made available on every formative feedback sheet and directly connected to the assessment criteria that is made available on Learning Central. The Dissertation and PME modules follow similar processes. The roles of each assessor within the end of year examination panel is explained in an exam briefing at Easter and just before the exams and then how the work is moderated, ie. we are balancing the marking procedures and standards between exam panels and not re-marking individual work or comparing the work from each unit.

8.   **The Assessment Process:** *Clarify the expected minimum level to achieve a pass. In particular are there any 'failable offences' and/or how is complexity demonstrated in smaller projects? Is there a minimum expected scale of thesis project? Or is the final year thesis not the place where the validation criteria needs to be demonstrated – can that/should that happen elsewhere.*

    The clarification of the minimum level to achieve a pass is set out in the assessment criteria. We will review these criteria in terms of the clarity of these statements and where the 'failable offences' lie.

    It has been accepted in the school that complexity in smaller projects can be shown in a variety of ways – this could be conceptual/ research rigour; excellent understanding and integration within specific context(s); a high level of technical resolution (construction, structures and environment); and/ or the scale of the overall proposal that might comprise many smaller architectural projects.

There is no minimum expected scale of thesis project, however, we have, and continue, to review this in respect to thesis projects that develop each year to ensure that the overall complexity exists.

We are in the process of reviewing the validation criteria 'compliance' aspect of each module within our MArch as part of a comprehensive Undergraduate programme review. This is not limited to the design thesis, but also technical, humanities, professional and other skills-based requirements. At present the Design Thesis is a key module for validation compliance.

9. **Year-on-Year Comments:** *Some of the studio spaces in Bute building are top lit but windowless which students reported can be quite soul-destroying for those who work in the studio a lot.*

We are aware of the nature of some of our studio spaces. The School is currently at the start of a significant re-modelling of our building and teaching/ learning spaces and environments. The construction is due to be completed by September 2022 and will see significant changes to the studio environments and the way students will engage with them. In the meantime, we are responding quickly and appropriately to physical space and environment issues where we can.

10. **Year-on-Year Comments:** *The ongoing challenge of maintaining parity between units in terms of the availability of visiting tutors/consultants compared with permanent staff members.*

This is a common difficulty within architectural education, where external practitioners and consultants have an important role in student learning. We continue to provide and expand the briefing information we provide all unit leaders and design tutors to ensure parity between internal and external tutors.

11. **Noteworthy Practice and Enhancement:** *The suggestions that the unit-specific assessment criteria interpretations could be 'weighted' to allow different units to weight different components to a different extent.*

We will review weighting the assessment criteria categories for future years, as part of the wider UG review referred to under item 8. We are conscious that we will need to ensure all students still meet the required validation criteria if some aspects of each unit were differently weighted and therefore focussed on less or more by students. For 2019/20 we have introduced a guidance mark at the end of the autumn semester to provide clarity on the research phase/ group work. This mark will be available at the end of year examination to provide greater clarity in the assessment of the final design project related to research rigour.

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