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Sent by email to t.sengupta@ucl.ac.uk

28 July 2017

Dear Dr Sengupta,

Re: Institutional Response: External Examiner Annual Report 2016–2017

I am writing further to the receipt of your External Examiner's Report for the MArch (dissertations).

Your Report has been considered by the School 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

1. Encouragement for further reduction in prescriptiveness on the nature of the MArch Dissertation which may be hindering creativity.
2. Your request for access to work from the entire mark range.
3. Suggested enhancement of internal moderation processes.
4. Encouragement for enhancing strong and rigorous empirical research with more critical thinking.
5. Your observation that few MArch dissertations had a truly innovative or original topic formulation and suggested introduction of informal student workshops to encourage such thinking.

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The following response has been provided on behalf of the School:

1. Since the 2016 version of the Handbook sent to the Examiners, there have been further amendments incorporated in the 2017 version (now Guide to Research Preparation and Dissertation), which have further reduced any prescriptiveness. In particular, Section 9 on dissertation structure does away with the more rigid aspects of the suggested model structure, emphasising the intellectual and creative struggle involved in bringing ideas to order. The External Examiners will receive a copy of the 2018 version in good time, and this will include further revisions in the light of current comments.

To address the question of methodologies, the School has initiated a series of lectures on the theme, ranging from architectural science and social sciences to history/theory. These are aimed at Postgraduate Research and Taught Masters students as well as March Dissertation students, and the lectures have been made available online. The lectures were not well attended by Dissertation students this year, doubtless because they took place rather late for them, but it is hoped that the new cohort will benefit from the online availability.

2. The request is justified, and the School will continue to try to do this as far as possible. It can be a challenge to reconcile this need with the necessity of matching particular externals with particular internals to make the viva timetable work.
3. The School has conducted a thorough review of the assessment and examination procedures and are proposing the following, subject to approval by the Board of Studies:
 - All dissertations are to be double-marked, by the supervisor (first marker) and by one other staff member (second marker). Each fill in a feedback sheet, and they will agree a mark. If they cannot agree on a mark, their respective proposed marks will be noted.
 - An internal moderation panel (4 or 5 members, chaired by Module Leader) will consider low and high marks, determine a final mark where internal examiners have been unable to agree, come to an overview of the marking and make any necessary adjustments in the light of it.
 - As currently there will be four External Examiners. Each will review a quarter of the dissertations. They will be provided with the internals' feedback sheets and the moderated marks in advance of the vivas.
 - The External Examiners will participate in the viva process, offering the students the chance to present to well-regarded subject specialists from other schools. Marks may be adjusted by a small percentage [to be discussed further] purely in the light of a student's performance at the viva.

- In accordance with the University's requirements, the External Examiners will comment on the thoroughness and fairness of the examination process, the academic standards and the marking levels, but they are not able to alter individual marks.

- The School's internal moderation panel will convene briefly after the vivas to address any issues relating to marks that may have arisen during the vivas.

4. While the emphasis on rigour is intended to be synonymous with critical thinking, there is indeed scope for conveying the importance of critical thinking more explicitly, and the Handbook/Guide will be adapted accordingly.
5. This will have resourcing implications, but the School will consider the possibilities for some kind of workshop or discussion event for MArch 2 students early in the Autumn term.

The University is pleased to note your positive comments including:

1. some very rigorous, interesting and truly commendable research;
2. student engagement with 'architectural' material and reading buildings spatially and architecturally;
3. the rigour of empirical research.

I hope that you will find this response satisfactory and we 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 website and will be available to all students and staff.

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.

Yours sincerely,



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