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Sent by email to mas58@cam.ac.uk

17 October 2016

Dear Ms Steane,

Re: Institutional Response: External Examiner Annual Report 2015–2016

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. Alternative thesis model for students pursuing topics in the history/theory area.
2. Suggested mid-point event at which the students make brief PowerPoint presentations to one another and to one or two staff members to encourage more dialogue between students.
3. Update guidance on the "significance of dissertation illustrations *and their captions*".
4. Highlighting to students the potential synergies between design and thesis projects.
5. Suggested consideration of how students can

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- 1) Identify the focus of their research and its critical design questions; and
- 2) Adopt, adapt or even invent the most appropriate methodology for exploring and illuminating the issues in play.

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

1. The School is adapting the dissertation handbook in order to be open to different ways of structuring the dissertation. The aim in offering a framework within the current handbook is not to limit students to a particular 'model' but to provide an example which they may or may not follow. The School will endeavour to make sure this is clear and to guide the students accordingly through supervisions.
2. Owing to scheduling challenges in the autumn term, it has not been possible to organise the event suggested for this year, though it is recognised that this would be of benefit to the students. The School currently holds group seminars where methodological issues and choices in the 1st year of the MArch are discussed, at the beginning (rather than in the middle) of the process.
3. This will be picked up in the revision of the Programme Handbook. It is a good point.
4. The School does this already in a number of ways, though it is also keen to emphasise that students may choose to establish the relation between the 'Dissertation' and 'Design thesis' for themselves.
5. The suggestion here would seem to be that the dissertation is interwoven with the design thesis, with design forming an important aspect of the 'methodology' alongside other methods (as appropriate to particular studies). If so, this is a direction the School continues to discuss but is not currently planning to implement.

The School is keen that students are not being formulaic in the way in which they approach methodology and are aware that while they are asked to do quite different kinds of research in the MArch, the School does not currently offer much by way of formal methods training to help them to select the 'most appropriate methodology'. This comes out of the process of discussion with and guidance from supervisors, and through the students' own explorations.

Consideration is being given to the possibility of offering a series of methodology-focussed sessions, potentially linked to several Masters-level programmes within the School.

The University is pleased to note your positive comments including:

1. your positive indications regarding the programme structure, academic standards and assessment process;
2. your confirmation of a positive response to your earlier suggestions on the range of dissertations provided to you.

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,



Mr Simon Wright
Academic Registrar