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Sent by email to mark.campbell@aaschool.ac.uk

28 September 2017

Dear Dr Campbell,

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. In terms of enhancement, the general engagement with topic research could be stressed and developed, through moves away from the current general methodology.
2. It may prove worthwhile to reinvigorate the discussion of the research – stressing its value as an architectural investigation – with both individual students and in collective discussions. In particular, this would allow students to compare approaches and methodologies and share interests.
3. In a few cases there was a marked disparity between the assessment and the actual intellectual achievement of the work – a disparity that tended toward the student work being assessed at a higher level.

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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. 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. In MArch 1 the School is introducing the Research Preparation module earlier, and plan to enhance group activities and interaction during the February and June short courses.

The School is not considering optional routes for the moment, but are encouraging a variety of methodologies (see above) and a variety of topics and approaches through the statements of research interests by potential supervisors.

3. The School has done a thorough review of the assessment and examination procedures and are proposing the following:

- All dissertations are to be double-marked, by the supervisor and by one other staff member. 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 External Examiners, who will each review a portion of the dissertations. They will be provided with the internals' feedback sheets and the moderated marks in advance of the vivas.

- 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.

- Each student will attend a viva, and their performance at the viva will count as 10% of the module mark, with the dissertation accounting for 90%. Students who fail the module and have to resubmit will not need another viva unless their original viva performance is assessed as a fail.

- The External Examiners will participate in the viva process together with one internal. The internal will keep time and record decisions.

- 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.

The University is pleased to note your positive comments including:

1. your positive indications regarding the programme structure, academic standards and assessment process;
2. commendable level of supervisory support for students;
3. rigorous and fair assessment process providing a comprehensive and balanced assessment of individual dissertations;
4. the oral examination is commendable as it allows both a detailed assessment of the work and the opportunity for the student to relate the dissertation to their overall interests at the conclusion of their degree.

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