CARDIFF UNIVERSITY External Examiner Annual Report Form

Guidance notes are available to support the completion of this Report via the Cardiff University Intranet here and from ExternalExaminers@cardiff.ac.uk.

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For completion by External Examiner:	
Name of External Examiner:	Ana Langer
Home Institution / Employer of External Examiner:	University of Glasgow
Programme and / or Modules Covered by this Report	MA in Political Communication

Academic Year / Period Covered by this Report:	2019-2020	Date of report	03/07/2020

Please complete all information in the spaces provided and submit within **six weeks** of the Examining Board (the dissertation stage Examining Board in the case of postgraduate Master's programmes).

Please return this Report, **in a Microsoft Word format**, by email to: externalexaminers@cardiff.ac.uk.

Please note this form will be published online and should not make any reference to any individual students or members of staff in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (2018).

Please extend spaces where necessary.

1. **Programme Structure** (curriculum design, programme structure and level, methods of teaching and learning)

Please include consideration of the following:

- *confirmation that the actions taken as a result of the variation of assessments in relation to industrial action and Covid-19 have been appropriate to protect the academic standards of the programme and have allowed students to achieve their programme level learning outcomes*

I was sent material about the programme (Handbook, programme diet, etc) as well as course syllabi and samples of work for eight modules through Blackboard:

MCT498/Reporting Health and Science
MCT533/Putting Research into Practice I
MCT534/Putting Research into Practice 2
MCT565/Debates and Concepts in Media and Communications
MCT506/Introduction to Political Communication
MCT535/Electoral Behaviour, Public Opinion and the Media

MCT566/Media and Political Understanding
MCT540/Social Media and Politics

Based on this material, I can confidently say that the MA in Political Communication is, undoubtedly, a high-quality programme. The programme structure and content, as well as the combined modes of assessment across courses, succeeds at achieving the difficult balance between a very solid academic focus (what we might call a more theoretical approach) and more practical dimensions, including a strong engagement with everyday developments in politics and communication. This is clearly the case in the media kit in the Introduction to Political Communication but also, for example, in Theories and Concepts, which has an applied theory to case element. Some of the assignments in the research components also provide very useful transferable skills. It is also a clear strength of the programme that it offers a wide-ranging and interesting set of optional courses which are specifically relevant to the programme.

The dissertation process is impressively done. I haven't seen the dissertations yet, but I am positively looking forward to reading them. Having said that, in terms of the programme structure, I think it is worth perhaps discussing whether it is too much for the dissertation to take 60 credits plus 20 more for PRiP 1, especially as the assignments (the proposal and literature review) for the latter could, in some ways, be considered as being credited twice.

The programme seems challenging enough for the most able but also doable enough for all. A few the students who have failed assessments seem to struggle with language, however. I wonder what the language entry requirements are and the level of support offered to international during the course, and whether this is enough (to be fair, the same concerns apply in some ways to my institution and programme and undoubtedly to many others).

The School and course conveners have been very diligent on trying to minimise the impact of the industrial action and the implications of COVID19 including, where appropriate, designing new forms of assessment.

2. **Academic Standards** (comparability with other UK HEIs, achievement of students, any PSRB requirements)

The programme provides a high-quality education, and this is recognised as such by academics and practitioners in the field in the UK and beyond. In my view, it is undoubtedly one of the top 3 Polcom programmes in the country. Moreover, having read a sample of work for all courses, it is clear that the programme teaches students of a range of abilities. This includes some students with a very high level of skills; these students clearly excel, and some of their work is very impressive indeed. But it is also clear from the assessment I have read that the programme greatly helps developing the skills and knowledge of those who start (for a number of reasons) at a lower level of ability.

It is also clear to me that the grades are an accurate reflection of the standards that students achieved and so are the overall degree classifications. The changes made as a result of COVID (the Safety Net Policy) seem reasonable and in line with what has been done by other UK institutions. It is a compassionate policy that also succeeds at maintaining the academic standards. It is also, I have no doubt, very difficult for staff to apply it, and so they should be commended, especially those in professional support roles.

- *module marks are an accurate reflection of the standards they achieved, and the award classification reflects their academic attainment on their degree programme.*
- *if scaling has been recommended by the pre-Examining Board, there is appropriate justification for the recommendation based on the scaling guidance and the proposed scaling methodology to be applied to the marks is appropriate*
- *the application of the Safety Net Policy to ensure that students' award classification reflects their academic attainment on the degree programme, and that the degree classification is not affected by any potential dip in their academic performance in assessments undertaken during a period of disruption.*
- *Highlighting where the Safety Net Policy could not be applied/or only in part due to specific PSRB requirements and the outcomes of the discussion and decisions made.*
- *the academic standards of degrees meet the requirements of the relevant national qualifications' framework.*
- *the degrees awarded by the University are valid and reliable and are of an equivalent standard to degrees awarded in previous years.*
- *confirmation that the degree outcomes of each programme under consideration are in line with the sector and meet any professional, statutory, regulatory body requirements.*
- *where issues have been identified, the main Examining Board have been clear in their deliberations and actions to safeguard the academic standards.*

3. **The Assessment Process** (enabling achievement of aims and learning outcomes; stretch of assessment; comparability of standards between modules of the same level)

Please include consideration of the following:

- *assessment variations used are appropriate, and where possible continue to test the module learning outcomes*
- *students continued to be provided with the opportunity to demonstrate achievement of the programme learning outcomes as a result of the variations*
- *assessments continued to be conducted with care and due diligence to ensure that students were not academically disadvantaged as a result of the variations.*

In my view, the suit of assessments across courses in the programme are well designed for testing the ILOs. Moreover, most courses include an applied/practical element, which is great to see. The marking is done fairly and rigorously, and is broadly consistent across courses (although some markers seem harsher on language than others), and the feedback is comprehensive and explains well the reasons for the grade and how students can improve.

Perhaps the marking criteria could be more consistently spelled out across courses, however. Also (and this is something we struggle with too), there seem to be some issues of consistency in the application (or even in the existence) of penalties for

over/under length. Same perhaps with low grades: some markers go as low as 20, whereas for others perhaps a bad grade is a high 40 or even a low 50. Consistency on this is particularly important as this marks will average for each course and later matter for the degree classification

Generally, the workload seems comparable across courses of the same number of credits. The only exception, I would say, is for Putting Research into Practice II where there are five assignments. The course is great and the assessment is actually very useful to prepare them for the dissertation and also helps students develop great transferable skills. However, 5 assignments do seem a lot for 20 credits for students as well as for markers.

I am confident that, despite the disruptions provoked by the impact of COVID19, the assessments process continued to be conducted in a fair and rigours manner. Changes were made to assessment where it was necessary while minimising (unnecessary) change.

4. **Examination of Master's Dissertations (if applicable)** (sample of dissertations received, appropriateness of marking schemes, standard of internal marking, classification of awards)

   Not applicable

Where possible please complete this section following the dissertation examining board determining the final award.

5. **Year-on-Year Comments**
   [Previous External Examiner Reports are available from the Cardiff University Website here.]

Please note that due to the unprecedented nature of the Covid-19 pandemic, Schools may have had limited time to enact changes.

Last year's report mentioned that Brexit featured strongly as an assessment topic and that this might be an issue. This wasn't an issue at all in the work I looked at for this year.

The report also raised continuing concerns about English language standards. This is something that the programme has worked on, but it is still, as across most of the UK HE sector as a whole, an issue. As I mention in my report, in part this problem might be a result of English entry requirements: are they high enough for students to perform at the level required?

6. **Preparation for the role of External Examiner (for new External Examiners only)** (appropriateness of briefing provided by the programme team and supporting information, visits to School, ability to meet with students, arrangements for accessing work to review)

Given that this is my first year as external examiner, it would have been great to be able to visit in person. This was, of course, made impossible by COVID19. Regardless, the convener and the support staff did their very best to provide me with all the necessary material, including a tailored folder in each of the courses pages in

Blackboard, which is incredibly helpful. They also made themselves available at every opportunity and answered my queries promptly and diligently. Given the context, this is particularly remarkable, and I am very grateful for it. The Guide for Markers is incredibly detailed and well done; it is a great resource for the external but even more so, I imagine, for markers, and especially new staff.

7. **Noteworthy Practice and Enhancement** (good and innovative practice in learning, teaching and assessment; opportunities for enhancement of learning opportunities)

Due to the need to for continued adaptations during the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, we would be grateful if you could please include consideration of the following:

- *advice and guidance on where adaptations can be made to support a blend of high-quality on-campus and online learning for 2020/21 to support Schools with curriculum developments to address ongoing requirements to socially distance due to Covid-19.*

The range of courses and how many of them have a more practical dimension is innovative and constitutes, for me, best practice among Polcom programmes in the UK. I am also highly impressed by the dissertation process, including the two Research in Practice courses as well as the away days. This is great for students and highly commendable, especially given the increasing time demands for staff that affect us all in the HE sector.

I also would like to congratulate the School for having an all-electronic submission and marking policy. This is best for students and best for the environment.

I was also very impressed for the excellent guide for marking, including on how to mark/comment on Turnitin as well as on process of moderation. This is a great resource for staff, especially new ones, as well as for students.

I do not have specific suggestions on how to deal with 2020/2021. What I can say, however, is that it is incredibly important that the needs and limitations (medical, psychological, practical) of both students and staff are taken into account. Staff can only do so much to 'transition' to remote teaching, especially when it is likely to be done fairly last minute (the situation is changing all the time) and under difficult conditions (e.g. absence/reduced childcare for many). Realistic expectations stated clearly and early are key.

8. **Appointment Overview (for retiring External Examiners only)** (significant changes in standards, programme/discipline developments, implementation of recommendations, further areas of work)

9. **Issues for Response**

To assist with a timely and detailed response top your report, we would be grateful if you could briefly summarise any issues referred to above that you would like to be specifically addressed in our institutional response.

1. Consider reducing the number of assignments in MCT534 Putting Research into Practice II.

2. Review whether there is enough consistency (it's impossible to have total consistency) across courses regarding penalties for length (over/under), how the range of marks are used (especially lower marks), and how much consideration is given to language in marking and feedback.
3. Review whether all course guides include consistent and up to date assessment instructions and marking criteria for each assignment.
4. Continue to work on providing English language support and consider revising whether the standards of English in the entry requirements are appropriate. I would assume that at least part of this responsibility falls outside the School.