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	For completion by External Examiner:		
Name of External Examiner:	Katie Lloyd Thomas		
Home Institution / Employer of External Examiner:	Newcastle University		
Programme and / or Modules Covered by this Report	MArch (Welsh School of Architecture)		
Academic Year / Period Covered by this Report:	2019/20	Date of Report:	27 July 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)

My previous 3 years I have only looked at MArch dissertations. This was my first year examining and getting an overview of the full MArch programme. Design studios show a good variety and the module Practice, Management and Economics (PME adds to the school's distinctive professional practice orientation).

In particular I want to commend the year 4 and 5 chairs who showed great nimbleness to Covid developments and enormous commitment to ensuring students had a good educational experience despite the lockdown, and that academic standards were more than maintained. Practice-based students in Year 4 faced particularly difficult circumstances with furloughing and losing their workplace community, but this was compensated by additional offer from the teaching staff. This additional workload must be recognised in 2020/21 staffing in particular, and in case of budget cuts, care needs to be taken that practitioners continue to be involved in design teaching to maintain the school's distinctive profession-oriented offer to their students.

Discussions with staff and students revealed however that there is little porosity between parts of the programme and few opportunities to view work in other modules or design studios. This isolation is more acute due to remote teaching, which removes the possibility of chance encounters (and the benefits of mixed unit studios in the school). The introduction of a dissertation symposium in Feb 2020 was a very positive development – but this and other new similar events (for example, cross-unit design reviews) can be expanded as points where teaching staff from different modules come together for further integration and for this to include paid hours for external staff).

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

I looked carefully at a full range of marks across Year 5 modules dissertation, design thesis and PME, including a fail in dissertation and PME. I also reviewed Year 4 modules. I can confirm that grades meet QAA and benchmark standards and demonstrate parity in terms of expectations, word length where relevant and marking with other similar modules in the UK. This was a particularly high achieving cohort and I congratulate students and the team for this impressive uplift in marks in such difficult times. At the same time, I wonder if the inclusion of the term 'comprehensive' in the criteria for 70% + is tending to encourage assessors to somewhat over-reward solid or research-heavy work which might miss the originality usually identified with design at first level. Interestingly, in discussion, students mentioned there could be more space for experimentation and risk in the programme.

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

Considerable care had been taken to facilitate assessment for students, and to make it easy for examiners to view work on Teams. Many thanks! Particularly commendable were the short videos many students had made to present their Design Thesis in lieu of in person reviews or interviews.

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

Pleased to see the dissertation marking process managed so well internally again this year and a good range of dissertations selected for review. Congratulations! Standards were appropriate including for the fail. A few comments for the team to consider:

- Offer more support in Year 4? In discussion students said they needed more support in Year 4 developing their topics, and often had to pretty much restart at the beginning of Year 4.
- Consider a different form of submission in Year 4? Change of focus between Y4/5 might explain a common issue where the literature review (completed in year 4) was somewhat unrelated to the rest of the thesis
- Encourage and support in assessment more open-ended history, theory or creative projects? I would have marked the one sample of this kind I saw, rather higher myself. Experiment and speculation was more evident in the design thesis, but many of the highly rewarded dissertations fell in to a more predictable

format of posing a contemporary question, selecting one or more case studies and including small numbers of interviews as key evidence.

5. Year-on-Year Comments

[Previous External Examiner Reports are available from the Cardiff University Website [here](#).]

I can only compare dissertations as it was the first time for me seeing the MArch full programme. Great progress with new symposium and very nicely timed for Year 4 students just embarking on their own dissertations. Best practice marking process now settling in very well. Modules were very evenly spread between examiners this year – good for overview but more focussed roles (say an examiner or two, who look largely at dissertations and a small sample of other work, another pair who look largely at design thesis, etc) would aid depth of understanding of particular modules.

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)

n/a

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

From above comments:

- Year 4 and 5 chairs showed great nimbleness to Covid developments and enormous commitment to ensuring students had a good educational experience despite the lockdown. In particular the existing experience of the Year 4 chair in remote delivery (students are usually in professional practice) was a great asset.
- The introduction of a dissertation symposium in Feb 2020 was a very positive development and should be expanded to enable more interaction between modules, and between design staff. The shift to online provision was managed very well in terms of individual support. But staff are very aware that a key issue for ongoing remote teaching will be in student to student interaction, and between colleagues, particularly part-time practitioner staff. We are all in the same boat here – trialling formats that can provide this. Possibilities could include: short start the week intros with the whole teaching team; timetabled student-to-student sessions; cross crits; present-in-person exhibitions, site visits, walks and other socially distanced meet ups.
- Particularly commendable were the short videos many students had made to present their Design Thesis in lieu of in person reviews or interviews.
- Very much appreciated the range of design units available to students and the group component of work in the first term.

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

The School is to be congratulated on making some significant changes to the Dissertation module and in particular to the assessment process over the 4 years of my involvement. The new dissertation module leader and team have shown energy and responsiveness to our comments, in renewing these processes and establishing an excellent framework for this important element of March students' work. I have particularly valued meeting students and staff throughout my appointment, and the general openness to our visits. MArch students are enthusiastic and confident, and very well served by a very committed and professional team. This has been even clearer in this difficult year.

It was very instructive to get an overview of the whole course in my final year. I appreciate very much its distinctive profession-oriented offer and hope the school can find ways to navigate its Year 4 in practice during times of likely job shortages in architecture. There seems to be more diversity of approach and speculation in the design thesis than in dissertation, and I hope the school can bring this into dissertation too, and ensure it fosters a strong base in history, theory and speculative design research. I was excited to learn of discussions about developing alternative routes through the March, for example profession / making / research, which could make more of existing strengths in the school (and perhaps in the shorter term reduce the pressure on finding work in mainstream practice in Y4). I wish the School all best for the difficult year ahead and for future plans. It has been a pleasure working with you.

9. Issues for Response

1. Due to job shortages for placement year students, extra teaching support will be needed in Year 4. This must be recognised in workload allocation in 2020/21 staffing. Furthermore, with possible budget cuts next year, the school needs to secure and prioritise part-time practitioners' involvement in design teaching to maintain the school's distinctive profession-oriented offer to their students.
2. Develop opportunities and support staffing, for cross-teaching, reviews and interaction between parts of the programme and to view work in other modules or design studios.
3. Look into offering more support in Year 4 developing dissertation topics, possibly involving more group work or a revised Year 4 submission.
4. Investigate means, through a criteria review for example, to encourage and reward risk taking in dissertation and design.
5. With role of dissertation examiner now phased out consider how to maintain more module specific review by external examiners.