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	For completion by External Examiner:		
Name of External Examiner:	Martin Stabe		
Home Institution / Employer of External Examiner:	Financial Times		
Programme and / or Modules Covered by this Report	MSc Computational and Data Journalism		
Academic Year / Period Covered by this Report:	2019/20	Date of Report:	17 Feb. 2021

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](mailto: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)

N/A - This report is about the dissertation stage only. I have addressed all other aspects of the programme in my report of 26 July 2020.

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

N/A - as above, however see the dissertation section (4) below.

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

N/A - as above, however see the dissertation section (4) below.

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

The dissertation module is well-structured to enable students to focus on some or all of the wide range of skills that fall under the wide field of “computational and data journalism”.

The sample of dissertations I received included projects that concentrated on front-end development of news applications, written stories based on data analysis or the production of interactive graphics. A dissertation project heavily focused on the project management and UX design functions found in data journalism teams was a welcome addition to the already wide range of specialist skills on display in the courses’ last four cohorts’ dissertations.

Overall, the marking was transparent, systematic and fair, with detailed feedback for students explaining the markers’ rationale.

One recurring theme in the markers’ comments was particularly notable: students were commended for realistic scoping and iterative production of projects that could ensure delivery within deadline — an important skill for journalists, especially those juggling technical work with reporting, to master.

However, the resulting range of possible projects and students’ freedom to define the technical scope of their work appears to create some difficulties in the relative marking of substantially different types of work, which was observable in comparing two projects marginally on either side of the lower boundary of the “distinction” marking band.

The module handbook’s description of the distinction banding states that projects receiving marks above 70 should be close to “professional quality and could be used as they stand or with very minor alterations”, but also that they should be “technically accomplished” and showing excellent evidence of “creative application of computational skills”.

One dissertation narrowly within this marking band was among the least technically ambitious projects in the sample. It consisted of extremely well-reported and -written news stories and competent — if unremarkable — graphical presentations of readily-available data produced using off-the-shelf tooling. The markers’ comments commended the students’ choice to focus on written content instead of front-end development as a strength of the project, because it allowed a focus on substantive content.

By contrast, another project demonstrated substantially greater technical accomplishment — incorporating code for data scraping, custom designed graphics and a well-designed front-end — but was marred by the relatively poor written English of a student not working in their native language. This latter project was marked just below the distinction band although it appeared to involve substantially more work, and arguably represented a greater demonstration of overall mastery of the programme’s aims, the former.

There were some other weaknesses to this project that justify its classification below distinction status, but as an editor I would have been far happier to have received it from a specialist data journalist than the distinction-level project.

In a professional context, the former project would have been published as routine news stories of a sort that many journalists produce even without the benefit of specialist data journalism training, while the latter could have been shaped by skilled editors into a remarkable “tentpole” feature of the sort that many news organisations are eagerly looking to graduates of specialist degree courses like this one to enable them to produce.

In previous years, I have noted that some marking on this degree course was skewed too far towards technical aspects of projects: sophisticated technical accomplishment could ensure high marks for work of moderate journalistic quality. This example suggests the pendulum may have swung slightly too far in the opposite direction.

This is a very difficult judgment, particularly given the huge range of possible dissertation project outputs, but this example left the impression that students risked a penalty for attempting work ambitiously scoped outside of their existing comfort zone, whether this writing copy, producing graphics or developing software. Conversely they could be rewarded for attempting (overly) cautious projects entirely based on their strongest abilities. Given that this course is intended specifically for those interested in working at the intersection of journalism and technology, however, I would argue that superior achievement in both technical skill and journalistic competence should be on display in projects awarded distinction-level marks.

What might help is to explicitly specify the relative weight of the very clear criteria set out in the dissertation module handbook. That way, it could be rendered impossible to achieve distinction level marks without both superior technical and journalistic effort, and would allow students to make informed judgments about how to balance their efforts between technical production and reporting.

## **5. Year-on-Year Comments**

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

Judging by the sample of dissertations, the pandemic had no noticeable effect on student performance, even though some students’ reflective comments did note that they had worked under difficult conditions such as being in government quarantine facilities abroad, or in work placements that were conducted entirely online.

It was my impression that the dissertations were on average stronger than in any previous year of my appointment. The distinction-level dissertations were highly professional work of a sort that major news outlets would have been happy to publish with minor editing, and even some of the less highly marked projects contained very strong elements that could have been edited into a publishable form with little effort.

**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)

I received a sample of dissertations spanning all of the marking bands as well as the markers' comments to the students, as well as links to the public-facing elements of the entire (relatively small) cohort's dissertations. These made it apparent that:

- The dissertation module offers students ample opportunity to specialise within the ever-widening field of computational and data journalism. I was particularly pleased to see a dissertation project that placed a strong emphasis on the user-experience design aspects of interactive development projects. This is an important specialism for which news organisations have traditionally had to recruit from other industries and degbecause few with journalism training have the required expertise.
- There appeared to be a new requirement to submit (1) a publicly-accessible web page containing the substantive work of journalism and (2) a publicly-accessible code repository underlying that work and (3) a reflective written piece explaining the processes and decision-making underlying the work. This exemplary level of transparency made accessing and assessing the material far more straightforward than in previous years, when there was less uniformity in the materials submitted by students.

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

As noted in my previous report for the summer exam board, I have been impressed by the degree to which the already strong quality of work by students on this programme appeared to have improved over the course of my appointment. This applies also to the final set of dissertations I have seen, which appear to be of a higher overall standard than in previous years.

## **9. Issues for Response**

1. What are the marking criteria for the dissertation and the procedure for ensuring the comparability of dissimilar projects emphasising various aspects of the degree programme?
2. How can the dissertation marking better balance students' freedom to specialise while rewarding those who attempt more difficult or ambitious work, or projects that most strongly reflect the full range of aptitudes instilled on the programme?