



Academic & Student Support Services
Academic Registrar Simon Wright LLB
Gwasanaethau Academaidd a Chefnogi Myfyrwyr
Cofrestrwydd Academaidd Simon Wright LLB

Cardiff University
McKenzie House
30-36 Newport Road
Cardiff CF24 0DE

Tel *Ffôn* I +44(0)29 2087 9189
www.cardiff.ac.uk

Prifysgol Caerdydd
Tŷ McKenzie
30-36 Heol Casnewydd
Caerdydd CF24 0DE

**Sent by email to simonleather@harper-adams.ac.uk
2017**

28 September

Dear Professor Leather,

Re: Institutional Response: External Examiner Annual Report 2016–2017

I am writing further to the receipt of your External Examiner's Report for the BSc Biology, BSc Ecology, BSc Zoology.

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.

Issue Highlighted

1. Large numbers of students on some final year modules.
2. The availability of literature based projects and their equivalence to practical/experimental research projects.
3. Student concerns regarding contact time in final year modules.
4. Provision of a list of final year project titles.

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

1. Student numbers are very variable on Final Year modules across the School, ranging from 7 to 115 (excluding the Final Year project module). This depends on which programmes the module relates to, the degree of optionality of programmes for the module and so on. The School does not believe it would

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be desirable from a student perspective to cap numbers arbitrarily and prevent students from studying their choice of modules. Whilst it is true that larger modules means whole-class discussion activities have a different dynamic and are less interactive, the nature of the modules and the use of alternative approaches which are increasingly being adopting, aims to address this point. For a School of this size, where student choice is paramount, large modules are probably inevitable for some subjects at Final Year.

2. The School offers a range of projects to Final year BSc students, including practical, literature, engagement and pedagogic projects, reflecting student demand and interest. Literature based projects are actively chosen particularly by the significant number of students who do not intend to pursue a career in practical science. They currently represent approximately 25% of all projects. As far as equivalence with lab based projects are concerned, it is the School's opinion that, if anything, literature based projects are more difficult than lab ones. Marking criteria are very carefully written to try to ensure that different types of project are marked to an equivalent level. We do not believe it would be desirable from a student choice perspective to insist that all students undertake a practical project. Practical projects in research labs do not offer a satisfactory (and potentially not even a safe) experience to students who are not seeking this experience. Hence with regard to number of projects (i) we cannot accommodate the entire cohort on practical lab based projects, and (ii) not all students actually want to do them. The School agrees that meta-analyses can provide a data-facing aspect to literature based projects, although this works well for some subject areas and is not feasible for others. The School also notes that offering literature projects is common in other Russell Group institutions and feels that it is in line with Sector practice.
3. Final year modules vary in their direct contact time according to teaching approach and subject areas – for example new subject introductions need more direct contact time than developments of existing ones. It should be noted that a key feature of course design is to make students into independent lifelong learners, which means that the proportion of didactic teaching should reduce over time with a greater requirement for students to find their own way through scientific literature, with contact sessions being more about facilitating this than presenting all of the information we expect them to know. The redesigned courses, Year 2 starting in 2017-8 and Final Year 2018-9, do have consistent defined contact times for each module, although it is up to the module design and delivery teams to decide exactly how this will be used.
4. In future the School will add final year project titles to the External Examiner's information list.

Additional comments / observations

Your comment on late work receiving a mark of zero has been noted. Senate Regulations provide that where Coursework Assessments are submitted late, and where there are no Extenuating Circumstances, a mark of zero shall be awarded for those Assessments. This University rule has been in place for many years and was retained following a University-wide consultation conducted in the *Assessment Matters* project in 2013-2014 and is being reviewed again during the 2017 -18 academic session. The School has confirmed previously that exceptions are made for students with extenuating circumstances and notes that the policy has led to very few late submissions of work.

You also commented on the presentation of module marks and final classifications. A suite of reports is available for Schools to use to meet the requirements of their Examining Boards and it is intended that they provide a broadly consistent approach across all Schools to limit the potential for error caused by individually produced School reports. Where Schools identify additional data requirements, they are encouraged to discuss them early in the academic cycle for consideration. Newly appointed Education Officers based in Registry will be providing ongoing support in this area in future years.

The University is pleased to note your positive comments including:

1. your positive indications regarding the programme structure, academic standards and assessment process;
2. excellent presentation of final year projects;
3. positive student feedback on the programmes;
4. detailed comments provided in feedback on student assessments;
5. excellent and challenging assignment in BI3114.

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