



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* | +44(0)29 2087 9189
www.cardiff.ac.uk

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

Sent by email to j.g.wakefield@exeter.ac.uk

23 October 2017

Dear Professor Wakefield,

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 in Molecular Biology / Genetics / Biotechnology / Biochemistry.

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. Your detailed observations that:
 - in one final year module, where short-answer examination questions were used (totalling a third of the paper's marks), some assessors wrote the allocated marks on the front sheet without converting to a percentage opening up the possibility of errors creeping in to spreadsheets; and
 - that one question was marked without any justification of how the marks were arrived at.
2. Instances where standards of feedback provided to students slipped and where the comments did not match the marking criteria and indication that it

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would be good to reinforce to staff the importance of matching feedback to criteria.

3. Difficulties in accessing and targeting individual Final Year Projects.
4. Need for a much more robust internal procedure for monitoring modules that show consistent discrepancy over time in terms of grades

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

1. Marks should certainly be recorded on the front sheet in the same way for all markers; the School will emphasise this in the information sent out to markers as clearly there the potential for introducing errors, although none in fact were. Markers are asked to justify their marks and the colleague who did not do this was working contrary to instructions. This requirement will be reinforced in the brief and clear documentation provided with marking tasks.
2. This should not happen and the School will reinforce the importance of this in instructions for marking. For 2017-2018 a new assessment framework has been introduced which should help to apply consistency across all marking.
3. The School will explore how this might be organised in such a way as to make it easier, for markers as well as external examiners, to access the necessary dissertations quickly, within the confines of the system provided and available staffing at a very pressured time of year.
4. The process for this, conducted by its Standards Panel has been less effective than the School would like. The role of this Panel will now be taken by a sub-group of the Board of Studies and will revisit current procedures for assessment of module performance; reasonable equality between modules is crucial in the new schemes, with 40 and 30 credit modules. The sub-group will confirm or redevelop procedures for recognition of poor performance and dealing with it, both in terms of potential scaling mechanisms for mean module marks below a certain threshold and ensuring that actions are taken for the next module cohort.

Nature of reports available to examiners

You also commented on the quality of the data and data analysis provided to external examiners. The School is being supported by the College Education Officer in order to overcome challenges with the statistical information has been made available to the Boards. Any additional data requirements should be discussed through this process.

The University is pleased to note your positive comments including:

1. your positive indications regarding the programme structure, academic standards and assessment process;
2. opportunities for students to undertake a Professional Placement Year in a research environment that will be beneficial for their future careers;
3. excellent feedback on written assessments, including Final Year Projects;
4. the commitments of the Biosciences Student Office and Education Staff.

I hope that you will find this response satisfactory and we thank you for your continued support of the programme.

As this is your final year as External Examiner, we would like to thank you for your service and we are most grateful for your valuable input into this process.

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