

Academic & Student Support Services
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Simon Wright LLB



Sent by email to ceb27@cam.ac.uk

07 December 2015

Dear Professor Bryant,

Re: Institutional Response: External Examiner Reports 2014 – 2015

I am writing further to the receipt of your External Examiner's Annual Report (dated 20 September 2015 and Dissertation Stage Report (dated 5 October 2015) for the MRes in Biosciences.

Your Reports have 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(s) Highlighted:

1. Your report of organisational issues due to increased pressure on staff and related comments;
2. your indication that it is essential that a marking criteria rubrick is completed for every dissertation project to ensure a clear explanation is available as to how the two internal markers arrive at their thesis marks;
3. Your suggested review of graduate outcomes after the first five years of the programme.

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

1. Organisational Issues: The MRes Programme Team thank you for raising concerns regarding the pressure on staff to deliver for this course, particularly in the time period running up to the Final Exam Board. In the main this pressure was generated by tight timetabling between dissertation submission and the final marking deadline prior to the Interim MRes Exam Board (for 2014-15 this was 13 working days 26 August to 19 September). In addition, undergraduate course responsibilities and the new intake of MRes students can impinge on staff time and availability in this time period. For 2015-16 in the current timetable of events there will be 15 working days available (Interim Exam Board scheduled 19 September 2016), therefore as a solution the MRes team will consider scheduling the Interim and Final Exam Board for the

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week beginning 26 September 2016, and arranging for the incoming MRes students to attend the presentation session of the outgoing MRes students.

The School of Biosciences has recently appointed a new Head of School and management structure. In addressing the pressures generated by the Undergraduate course, the School has undertaken a major review of the Undergraduate degrees and is currently in the process of redesigning these courses with consultation across the School. It is believed that this approach will help to facilitate the need to integrate Postgraduate and Undergraduate teaching administration.

2. This issue was extensively discussed with the External Examiners during the Examining Board and the School fully understands the need to have a separate marking criteria rubric in place for a) the supervisor mark and b) the dissertation. Supervisors will be given clear instructions to complete these rubric forms as independent mark components and not as a combined mark. Second markers will be asked to complete the dissertation rubric only. Additional time between the hand in date for the dissertation and the interim Examining Board will allow for the necessary checks and scrutiny of the mark forms for these two components to be carried out by the module lead.
3. At present records show that from 2010-2015 79 students completed the MRes course and that 42% went on to study for a PhD, 18% entered Scientific Employment, 3% entered Non-scientific employment, 1% entered Educational employment (e.g. teaching) and 3% entered Continued Education (non-PhD). The MRes team and Course Secretary will endeavour to obtain further information regarding the destination of MRes students and will use this data to aid in the recruitment of students on to the course.

The University is pleased to note your positive comments including:

1. Your positive indications regarding the programme structure, academic standards and assessment process
2. Your report of student appreciation of the support they receive from supervisors and other staff and of the efforts of the student-staff panel;
3. Your particular commendation of the project stage and its administration and of the dissertations and presentations;
4. Your confirmation of the responsiveness of the programme team to suggestions made by External Examiners.

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.

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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