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Sent by email to [adam.benham@durham.ac.uk](mailto:adam.benham@durham.ac.uk)

27 February 2017

Dear Dr Benham,

**Re: Institutional Response: External Examiner Annual Report 2015–2016**

I am writing further to the receipt of your External Examiner's Report for the BSc in Biochemistry, BSc in Genetics, BSc in Molecular Biology and the BSc in Biotechnology.

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. Not every student has the opportunity to do laboratory projects in the final year.
2. Variation in length of laboratory work in laboratory projects.
3. Relevance of statistics teaching and the use of R.
4. Non-standard organisation on different modules on Learning Central.
5. Library facilities – not enough seating.
6. Desk size in refurbished lecture theatres.
7. Tough marking at higher end of the scale.
8. Oral presentations worth different amounts in different final year modules.
9. Provision of second and third year papers and model answers piecemeal.
10. Handling reports of extenuating circumstances.

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## The following response has been provided in consultation with the School:

1. Not all students want to do laboratory reports - some prefer library or engagement projects. It is not possible to provide individual research projects for all students. Project distribution for lab and library projects is based around student selection from a list of 30 potential projects (related to their subject area), coupled with ranking based on year 2 result for particularly popular projects selected by more people than can be accommodated. Overall, 75% of students had lab projects; only one student from the entire cohort did not get a project they had selected from their list.
2. Not all projects can run at exactly the same time due to the availability of space and material. Some variation exists in laboratory and supervisor practice but the expected timing and workload is clearly published to students and supervisors every year.
3. R was adopted by the School a few years ago when the Minitab subscription was discontinued by the University. A review of statistics provision in the School will be performed this academic year (2016-2017) to see if this is still appropriate.
4. The School notes this comment; there is variation between modules, although the key information is present in each. The University is currently formulating recommendations for learning central organisation and the School will apply them as appropriate.
5. Whilst this is not under the School's control, the University is planning major changes to library organisation, and the BIOSI library will be moving out of the building. The School aims to use as much of the vacated space as possible for student study areas.
6. This is not under the school's control but the refurbishment of the basement lecture theatres has been superb in improving functionality and environment. The desks are small, as a consequence of provision of electric sockets (previously requested by students) for charging devices. There is no space for increasing desk size.
7. The School notes that few marks are awarded above the 70-80 band. While one must always be aware that there might not be all that many answers worth those higher marks, the School is reviewing the marking criteria to help markers assess whether a mark in the 70-80 band should, in fact, be higher.
8. The use of 10 minute oral presentations occurs in several final year modules, worth in some cases 10% of the module and others 30%. This practice will continue for the next year as the School's new degree schemes are developed; there will be a new consistent assessment approach across all final year modules in the new scheme. The School does not wish to make

major changes to assessment in the old scheme for its remaining time, however this issue is recognised. The School will request that the module leaders review and revise the overall Year 3 oral presentation marking criteria appropriately for 10% and 30% mark contributions.

9. Not all papers were ready at the same time, partly through pressure of work on certain staff and working practices of different exam liaison officers. This will be addressed this year by running the exam paper production process under the Educational Quality and Standards Committee to provide direct management oversight.
10. The means of dealing with extenuating circumstances are continually under discussion; the School has the extenuating circumstances group, which decides on severity and reports to the subject exam boards. Circumstances are then commented on at final exam board which is the only stage at which the whole picture can be seen. The School is changing the way that circumstances are handled at an early reporting and decision making part of the process and will explore how efficiencies might be improved later in association with exam boards.

#### **Additional comments / observations**

You commented on the involvement of Registry colleagues at the Examining Board. Where appropriate, Registry staff attended the Exam Board when requested. The usual time allocation is one hour and in this situation, staff remained at the meeting for approximately 2.5 hours. You will appreciate that at this very busy time of year it was not possible for staff to attend the entire meeting given the ranges of Exam Boards in operation. Where Schools would like to extend the time spent with Registry staff either before or at the Exam Board meetings, there are opportunities available however this must be negotiated in advance of the meeting in order to provide specialised advice and guidance. It is not usual practice for Registry staff to respond to External Examiner comments at Examining Boards as some issues require fuller investigation.

You also commented on the “user-friendliness” of the Student Information Management System. A suite of reports is available for Schools to use to meet the requirements of their Examining Boards. It is intended that they provide a broadly consistent approach across all Schools and limit the potential for error caused by separate School-produced reports. The content of the SIMS reports formed part of the University’s *Assessment Matters* project in 2013-2014 and all Schools were consulted on the nature of the reports. Where Schools identify additional data requirements particular to their needs it is open for them to draw the matter for consideration by the University Assessment Working Group.

Your comments on University conventions on the rounding of marks have been noted. The Definition of Generic Terms Used in Senate Regulations provide the basis for rounding marks used to classify awards. The following definitions are used:

**Module Mark:** The total mark for an individual Module, calculated according to the weightings for each component summative assessment specified in the Module description, rounded and recorded as a whole number. The marks for the component summative assessments will be whole numbers between 0 and 100.

**Year Result:** The combined average of the marks for Modules / Units of Study contributing to a year of study calculated, rounded and recorded to a whole number.

**Final Mark:** The combined average of the Module Marks contributing to the final award, weighted according to the Classification Set for the Programme and Credit rating of the Modules calculated, rounded, and recorded as a whole number.

The above definitions, approved by the Senate, establish the process for the calculation of module marks, the final mark used to classify the award and the year result. One of the reasons for adopting the above rounding conventions was to enable students to use module marks to calculate the final mark and the degree classification. If unrounded marks were used this would not be possible.

**The University is pleased to note your positive comments including:**

1. your positive indications regarding the programme structure, academic standards and assessment process;
2. positive student perception of the Programmes;
3. the University External Examiner Induction Day for new appointees;
4. opportunities to meet students in advance of examinations;
5. the level, clarity and consistency of annotations on exam scripts; and the consistency of annotation of exam scripts was noteworthy;
6. impressive professional training year opportunities.

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

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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