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Sent by email to s.goodwin@sheffield.ac.uk

16 August 2016

Dear Dr Goodwin,

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

I am writing further to the receipt of your External Examiner's Report for the Astronomy & Astrophysics modules on undergraduate programmes in the School of Physics & Astronomy.

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 comments and suggestions on Continual Assessment (CA) and its examination.
2. Your detailed observations and recommendations on Year 4 Projects;
3. Your encouragement for greater transparency in the use made of learning outcomes and assessment criteria and related comments.
4. Your request that module reports should be produced and provided to the External Examiners and cover any specific problems/issues, and an overview of the student performance.
5. Your indication that clear guidance needs to be provided to both students and staff as to what constitutes plagiarism and clear formal procedures need to be in place to deal with cases.

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

1. The University is currently supporting a major initiative looking at all aspects of assessment and feedback, and the School of Physics and Astronomy has thoroughly engaged with these matters. CA in earlier years is a useful tool to provide students with simple exercise material to help engagement with learning and provide some feedback on progress but we acknowledge that the nature of CA in “taught modules” must change at higher levels, where CA must be designed to test deeper understanding and also test a range of learning outcomes and skills different from those assessed in formal examinations. The review is ongoing but it is also urgent.

In the coming academic year:

- the School will provide External Examiners with module marks showing both exam and CA components.
 - the School will provide Externals with samples of CA work and their marking.
 - CA marks as well as examination marks will be discussed at Examining Boards to further raise awareness amongst teaching staff of the need to moderate CA marks.
 - the School will reassess its guidance to Module Organisers on the form and volume of CA, on assessment criteria and on feedback to students.
2. The School fully acknowledges the concerns expressed over the lack of transparency with the Year 4 project mark assigned by the Project Supervisor (20% of the overall mark) and also notes the comments that the External Examiners expressed particular concern with the projects undertaken by Astrophysics or Physics with Astronomy students. As a minimum for the next session the School will:
 - require supervisors to set out full and clear aims and objectives with specified goals at the outset of the each project and against which they can assess student progress.
 - review assessment criteria to provide objective criteria against which marks can be awarded (with justification).
 - adopt the proposal for requiring students to keep a project notebook which is view on a regular basis and forms part of the assessment.
 3. The School publishes learning outcomes for all modules in its Module Catalogue. It also publishes generic assessment criteria which are broken down into “taught modules” assessed largely by examination, laboratories, computing modules and Year 3 and Year 4 projects. The Module Catalogue is given to all students (hardcopy) and the Module Catalogue and our Assessment Criteria are available on line. Further details of expectations and assessment criteria are published in Project Handbooks. However, it is clear

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from your comments that assessment criteria need urgent consideration and expansion. The School also has to ensure that all staff adhere to the same set of assessment criteria.

4. The School's Teaching Quality Officer collates questionnaire statistics and requests that staff provide a reflective review of their teaching on a module and on the student outcomes. These can be made available to External Examiners (although the Spring-semester reflective reviews would not be available prior to the Finals Exam Board).
5. Guidance on the avoidance of plagiarism is provided to students in the Undergraduate Student Handbook as well as various other sources of information published generically by the University (e.g. through Learning Central). There is further guidance on the avoidance of plagiarism published in Project Handbooks as well as specific guidance on self-plagiarism associated with Interim and Final Project Reports or re-use of material in a Year 4 project from material already used in a Year 3 project report. The School fully complies with the formal procedures set out by the University (as informed by the OIA) for reporting and investigating suspected cases of plagiarism. The School does distinguish between small lapses in referencing (e.g. a short quotation missing quotation marks or a reference missing from a figure) and cases involving more substantial plagiarism; the former is handled by reducing marks whereas the latter is always investigated formally, but clearly there is an element of judgement on these occasions.

Staff are equally made aware of what constitutes plagiarism and what mechanisms are available to deal with suspected cases, but again the School must ensure that all staff are fully conversant with the requirements and know how to use tools such as Turnitin.

The University is pleased to note your positive comments including:

1. your positive indications regarding the programme structure;
2. your report of positive student feedback on provision;
3. your particular commendation of 'soft' skills training.

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