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Sent by email to f.r.laughton@bath.ac.uk

15 August 2017

Dear Dr Laughton,

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

I am writing further to the receipt of your External Examiner's Report for all BSc and MPhys degree programmes in the School of Physics.

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. The number of marks available per hour of examination for each module;
2. How the overall aims for continuous assessment in modules are set and how they demonstrate appropriate levels of achievement in comparison with examinations;
3. The use of scatterplots showing each student's overall mark on a particular module, compared to their average mark across all of their other modules taken during the same academic year;
4. Adoption of a more transparent checking, moderating and documenting process for exams;
5. Student comments regarding support for module choices in year 3/4;
6. A change to procedures for assessing the MPhys dissertations this year with specific reference to double-blind marking;

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7. Moderation of MPhys projects where the marks fall below the degree classification boundary;
8. A University review of the nature and extent of the assessment-related data provided to Examinations Boards;
9. Appropriate levels of feedback for students on their assessed work.

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

1. The School uses a very limited number of exam-paper styles in Year 1 to 3 (see Appendix 1 in the attached Staff Handbook) for the very reason of ensuring comparability of marking and also so that students get used to the style of papers and so that they can pace their performance in exams. Most papers for 10-credit modules in which the exam counts for 80% of the mark are two-hour papers with 40 marks for four Section A questions and 40 marks for two Section B questions. There are some three-hour papers associated with 20-credit modules where the total marks are 120 (so in direct proportion). There are some one-hour papers from a very limited number of modules in which the module mark is assessed 50% by exam. We currently have no standardisation in Year 4 papers but encourage all set papers comprising four “long” questions in which students choose three to answer. Because of some particular problems this year and last year, the School will consider format of Year 4 papers in the same way as in Years 1 to 3.
2. The School is currently reviewing its whole continuous assessment provision with a view to making significant changes for 2017-2018. The School is trying to take a “holistic view” across all our undergraduate degree programmes moving from simple, coordinated mathematical exercises in Year 1 to more in-depth probing of understanding of concepts in later years (including the use of “essay-style” questions).

The School introduced the use of plots of continuous assessment versus Exam marks for individual modules last year in our exam boards in an attempt to identify those modules where continuous assessment seemed inappropriate (i.e. the “flat-liners”). Along with module averages and distribution of marks on each module, these are the most-discussed elements of our Exam Boards; these provide a good basis for bringing modules into some harmony without engaging in heavy-handed management. There has been a slight improvement since last year, but intervention may be required in some modules. Ideally continuous assessment should offer an alternative form of assessment not available in examination conditions, but it should still be rigorous and objective. Our review should provide further recommendations (and requirements) for staff.

3. The School has traditionally used average marks and mark spreads to compare outcomes across the modules which constitute our undergraduate programmes. We do have written policies on modules which fall outside prescribed “norms” and we have also taken action on assessment of modules

which have yielded marks regularly out of line with accepted “norms”. It would be a useful exercise to compare the data proposed by Dr Laughton and if found valuable we could investigate whether or not the University could provide a facility to create these comparisons.

4. Our procedures for marking and checking exam scripts are clear but it seems they are still not followed universally by all members of staff. The School will stress the necessity to adhere to our stated procedures. Our procedures for “Green Penning” requires a subset of scripts on each exam to be second marked. Second-marked scripts should be identified as such and should be clear to the external examiners.
5. The School have noted this and propose some action to provide this facility for next academic year.
6. The School acknowledge that double blind marking is a University requirement and are urgently reviewing the current practice within the School before the start of the next academic year.
7. The School has already agreed to implement this policy.
8. The School will continue to work with Registry to ensure that appropriate information is supplied to Examination Boards. The introduction of College Education Officers within Registry will help to support Schools with this process in future years.
9. At the request of the External Examiners last year, we made examples of student work on continuous assessment in Year 3 and 4 available to the Externals. The review includes a review of both assessment and feedback, with the aim of harmonising staff expectations and setting minimum standards for the feedback provided to students and will also cover feedback on examinations.

The University is pleased to note your positive comments including:

1. Your positive indications regarding the programme structure, academic standards and assessment process;
2. The standard of the project reports and with the range of projects that are offered to the students;
3. The secure online system for accessing draft examination papers and solutions;
4. Your visit to the School was very well organised, and the administrative arrangements for scrutiny of examination scripts and coursework, including final year projects, were excellent;
5. The students were complimentary about the many instances of excellent lecturing, and the general approachability and helpfulness of staff

I hope that you will find this response satisfactory and all School responses will be discussed in detail through the Annual Review and Enhancement process. 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