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**Sent by email to Professor Steven Sait**

**09 August 2019**

Dear Professor Sait,

**Re: Institutional Response: External Examiner Annual Report 2017/18**

I am writing further to the receipt of your report for the MRes in Biosciences.

Your report has been considered by the School and is the basis of this Institutional Response on behalf of the Vice-Chancellor. The School will also use its contents to help inform their [Annual Review and Enhancement](#) process and where appropriate, [Periodic Review](#).

**Issues highlighted in your report:**

1. **The Assessment Process:** The moderation of marks works well, although in some cases more detailed rationale for how final marks are agreed is needed.
2. **Year-on-Year Comments:** Examples of good practice in marking and assessment could be shared more widely with staff involved with the programme.
3. **Year-on-Year Comments:** There was some discussion about whether supervisors should assess dissertations because of concerns about over-generous marking; I would strongly encourage the programme team to keep this element of the assessment.
4. **Year-on-Year Comments:** For dissertations, the 25% performance mark awarded by the supervisor remains high compared to other institutions,

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- and the level of evidence/justification for the mark, both high and low, is not clear or sufficiently justified in some cases.
5. **Year-on-Year Comments:** Application of statistical approaches is lower than expected in a small number of cases. Offering a 'statistics surgery' to stage 2 students could be potential solution to the disparity between the 'learning phase' in Stage 1 and the 'application phase' in Stage 2.
  6. **Year-on-Year Comments:** There is a lack of process for grant proposal assignments that are not at the appropriate standard for an MRes project or are potentially flawed. Evidence that problems have been addressed in response to feedback should be provided.
  7. **Year-on-Year Comments:** In a small number of cases the dissertation project was largely technique-driven and lacked clear hypothesis testing.
  8. **Year-on-Year Comments:** In relation to the mid-stage review in stage 2, programme staff should consider an evidence-based procedure for resolving situations when students are not making satisfactory progress or where problems have occurred, potentially outside the students' control.
  9. **Year-on-Year Comments:** A small number of students clearly shared data and findings, and while this was appropriately dealt with by the exam board, procedures need to be put in place to prevent such instances occurring:
    - i. The practice of students working together on largely the same project should not be permitted.
    - ii. The regulations concerning what constitutes original and independent work, and transparent acknowledgement of the input of others, should be reinforced for both staff and students so that appropriate advice and guidance is provided throughout Stage 2.
  10. **Year-on-Year Comments:** Students felt that the mid-stage review could be a more substantial appraisal of progress and problems with a longer, more in-depth discussion with the supervisor and clear outcomes and action points.

### Response provided by the School:

1. The issue of large discrepancies in marks in the grant proposal and projects is now dealt with by involving third markers where marks are 10% or more apart – the two original markers are no longer simply asked to come to an agreement.
2. The Board has decided that BIT014 module leader will look for suitable past projects to share with newer members of academic staff to ensure good practice in marking.
3. We are keeping the supervisor's assessment of the reports.
4. The Board has decided to implement the lower supervisor mark (15%) for 2019/20. The module leader will be adjusting the marking criteria and marking form as well as module description.

5. Statistics clinics are now held weekly by BIT010 module leader and demonstrators to support students.
6. The form and criteria have been modified by BIT011 module leader. The instructions for the grant proposal have been modified to include an expectation from the students to describe how data will be analysed. Correspondingly, the marking criteria now include a section on satisfactory description of statistical analysis.
7. With the implementation of the changes described above, and with closer scrutiny of the proposals by the markers, these rare cases should now be detectable at an early step.
8. The students are reminded to discuss their project progress regularly with their supervisor and also with their tutors at scheduled tutorials. Both students and supervisors will be reminded to report any concerns directly to the MRes team (Director and / or administrator) as soon as an issue appears; this could be prior to a scheduled event (tutorial or mid-stage review). In addition, the mid-stage review forms will be reviewed by the team (administrative support and course Director).
9. The training students currently receive regarding what we entitle 'plagiarism' but actually includes all unfair practice including group work, data-sharing and technical assistance for practical work that has not been appropriately acknowledged is discussed in some detail in a session in BIT011 in early October of each academic year. This is associated with a Turnitin exercise that BIT011 and BIT002 run jointly. Work from the three modules is checked with Turnitin and issues of unfair practice are discussed with students in the February tutorial with the personal tutor.

As a result of what happened in 2017-2018, the MRes course Director will now also be running a second session in July dealing specifically with dissertation writing and issues of text plagiarism, data sharing, acknowledging data sharing and group work, recognising technical assistance.

The Director also now scrutinises all project abstracts at the time of project approval in late October - early November. We specifically ask all supervisors to seek approval from the Director if they envisage data sharing, and to provide justification.

Any case of plagiarism (using a broader definition outlined above) detected during assessment of grant proposal or dissertation documents is dealt with through our School's established Unfair Practice procedure. Any cases that have been flagged up by assessors, External Examiners or supervisors are reported at Exam Boards.

10. We are considering adding new questions to mid-progress form for 2019/20. We are also considering asking students to provide a contents page for their reports that they would agree with their supervisor, possibly by mid-July. This would help provide clear outcomes and action points that need to be followed.

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

1. Your positive indications regarding the programme structure, academic standards and assessment process.
2. Carrying out hypothesis-driven research and presenting the results as a seminar provides a valuable “real research” experience.
3. All the seminars are given on the same day and all students attend. This is good practice as the students benefit from seeing everyone else’s work.
4. The feasibility assessment provided by a second marker for the grant proposal assignment in BIT011 is an important and useful contribution to the assessment process and in the final experimental design.
5. The use of third markers where an additional level of moderation where the two markers failed to agree a mark is very good practice.
6. Students were overwhelmingly positive about the MRes programme and stage 2 in particular.
7. The programme as a whole, and the research project in particular, provides an outstanding foundation for a research-focused career.
8. The breadth of taught topics and wide choice of research projects is challenging. I hope the team maintains this design despite the temptation to perhaps focus on one aspect, such as lab-based research techniques. I am not aware of another programme like it.
9. The programme and admin staff have never failed to address any issues swiftly, openly and robustly, which is to their credit. The implementation of changes to assessment procedures following recommendations by external examiners is especially noteworthy.

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.

We hope that you will find this response satisfactory and 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’s [Public Information website](#) and will be available to all students and staff.

We are most grateful for your comments and for your support in this matter.

Yours sincerely,

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