



Academic & Student Support Services
Gwasanaethau Academaidd a Chefnogi Myfyrwyr
Registry
Y Gofrestrfa
Academic Registrar Cofrestrydd Academaidd
Simon Wright LLB(Hons)

Cardiff University
McKenzie House
30-36 Newport Road
Cardiff CF24 0DE
Wales UK
Tel please see below
Fax +44(0)29 2087 4130
www.cardiff.ac.uk

Prifysgol Caerdydd
Tŷ McKenzie
30-36 Heol Casnewydd
Caerdydd CF24 0DE
Cymru Y Deyrnas Unedig
Ffôn gweler isod
Ffacs +44(0)29 2087 4130
www.caerdydd.ac.uk

Sent by email to Dr Dylan Gwynn Jones

13 September 2019

Dear Dr Jones,

Re: Institutional Response: External Examiner Annual Report 2018/19

I am writing further to the receipt of your report for BSc Biology / Ecology / Zoology.

Your report has been considered by colleagues in 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](#).

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 variety of teaching methods, particularly the impressive practical elements demanding multi-variate analyses.
3. Use of the upper range for marking.
4. Improvement in referencing improve over the past four years.
5. Consistent, clear and thorough annotations on all exam scripts inspected.
6. Clear marking criteria.
7. Good feedback that explains clearly why a particular mark had been awarded.
8. Evidence of staff research backgrounds having a positive influence on teaching via examples used and standard of work expected.
9. The impressively smooth transition to the new programme structure.
10. Students appeared to be performing better overall based on the new structure.



Registered Charity, no. 1136855
Elusen Gofrestredig, rhif 1136855

Issues highlighted in your report and response provided by the School:

1. **Programme Structure:** *Opportunities for field training possibly reduced in new structure.*

There is the same field course provision for our current degree schemes as we had previously in the curriculum. This includes a 10 credit field course module (BI2134, taken at the end of Year 2), and a week-long field course (taken at the beginning of Year 2), as well as day-long field courses for the modules BI2131 (Animal Diversity and Adaptation) and BI2133 (Ecology and Conservation – A). However one possible impact is that in order to take BI2134, students also are required to enrol on the 30 credit BI2133 module. As a consequence, this may potentially deter some students who would have been interested in a 10 credit module, but not a (*de facto*) “40 credit” module. We are considering offering the field course module as an additional ‘research experience’ for Year 2 students to attend (space permitting) outside of the formal curriculum, but the implications of this need to be carefully considered as this would potentially include students who are working on the taught activities for credit, and those who are not.

The timing of the Final Year Project may have impacted on the opportunity for field course-related work, due to the earlier submission date of the project report. However, we feel this will have been compensated by the earlier start of the Final Year Project work (late October, rather than December/January) so we anticipate that this will improve opportunities for field-related work in the final year.

An additional issue which may have impacted on students enrolling on the BI2134 module is that until the 2019/20 intake, we were not able to advertise BSc Biological Sciences (Zoology) on UCAS, and so we strongly suspect that we have not attracted students who would previously have enrolled on the BSc Zoology or BSc Ecology degrees. Indeed, we have noted that the number of students taking the Ecology/Field-course compared to previous years has dropped relative to the number of students that we used to recruit onto the Zoology degree. We have introduced Biological Sciences (Zoology) as an entry degree scheme for 2019/20 intake, and so hopefully will address this deficiency, but will monitor this impact.

2. **Academic Standards:** *Examination answers were comparable in terms of content but were not as well written as in previous years.*

We also noted that there were some discrepancies in exam answers compared to previous years, including less use of independent reading. This may be due to three reasons; (a) Less focus on essay writing in exams in Year 2 compared to previous years (this has been remedied by increasing the time allocated to essay writing in Year 2 exams and improved support for students in Year 2 for this skill); (b) Insufficient support for essay writing in Year 3 (although sessions were run around

December/January and again in March to support students, though these were poorly attended); (c) Increased focus of students on coursework elements for the modules at the expense of undertaking extra reading (this will be addressed throughout the year by guidance from the Year 3 co-ordinator and Director of Undergraduate Education).

3. ***Year-on-Year Comments:*** *Issues with students responding to feedback remains as a problem.*

Encouraging students to engage with feedback is an ongoing issue. This will be addressed proactively in the 2019/20 academic year by our new Assessment Lead. In particular we are aiming to enhance engagement with feedback in Years 1 and 2 so that more effective use is made in Year 3, and Personal Tutorials will be structured in part to emphasise engagement with feedback.

In addition, we have identified some reasons why students opt not to read feedback, which are to do with the utility of previous feedback they have received, and the perception of negative comments in written feedback. We are working to raise awareness of the impact of these to staff. We have also adopted the use of detailed marking rubrics for as many assignments as possible, which automatically provide feedback as well as a mark for students.

4. ***Appointment Overview:*** *The new structure has less emphasis on exams and in one module there is no exam.*

The new modular structure has a ratio of 40:60% for coursework vs exam in all but 3 modules. This was adopted for two reasons: (i) To enhance the development of a range of transferrable and academic skills in Year 3 through coursework assignments; (ii) To mediate the impact of a single exam on the student's degree outcome. In the former curriculum the exam was an 80% weighting for each of 4 x 20 credit modules, so the exam component represented 53.33% of the Final Year. In the new curriculum, the exam component represents 60% of 3 x 30 credit modules, which equates to 54% of the Final Year assessed by exam for most students. Of the three modules (besides the Research Project) that are coursework only, 2 modules (BI3154 and BI3354) have a significant component which is an individual performance under exam conditions. The remaining module (BI3153) is only assessed through written coursework, and the module mean for this module is very slightly higher than our typical target range (55-65%). The module team have been appraised of this, and Dr Gwynn-Jones's concerns, and are looking to introduce an examined element in 2020/21.

5. ***Appointment Overview:*** *Dissertations have become more desk-based over the years.*

We would need to confirm that this is indeed the case, and will review this to identify if there is a significant issue here. However, we do not think that the overall number of desk-based projects has increased significantly over recent years. It should be noted that the cohort of students undertaking BI3001 (Final Year Project) does not include the c.30-40 students who are on the Integrated Masters track. In previous years before the introduction of our Integrated Masters programmes, these students would almost certainly have all undertaken lab-based projects. Therefore their exclusion from BI3001 (they undertake BI3008 instead in Year 3 of their course) may have had the impact of seeming to increase the proportion of desk-based projects in BI3001 as a proportion of the total, even though the actual number of desk-based projects undertaken has not changed.

Issues highlighted in your report and response provided by the University:

6. ***Appointment Overview:*** *University review of administrative structures.*

Transforming Cardiff is a programme of change that will enable Cardiff University to deliver the key strategic outcomes described in The Way Forward, 2018-23 strategy whilst addressing the external and internal factors that have had a negative financial impact. This means cultural change in order to enhance the student experience and staff well-being while creating financial stability.

The University has an excellent workforce, which has enabled our current success. The quality of our teaching, research and professional service support is a key part of what makes our University a great place to work and study. We must retain and support excellent staff; one of the major drivers of the project is to build on and improve that quality still further in the context of a competitive market both for high performing students and staff.

Our ambition is to be a leading Russell Group institution, in the world top 100 and the UK top 20 that delivers high quality teaching, a consistent student experience and research excellence that addresses the challenges of our time, whilst reflecting our commitment to the Civic Mission. To support this ambition, addressing staff workload and student feedback will be critical.

It is essential to plan and implement this programme now, given the current financial circumstances and in the context of the external environment. The programme is carefully phased to minimise disruption

and to manage workload, with a timeline matching that of *The Way Forward*. This phased approach, is precisely what guarantees the stability and effectiveness of our plans in an uncertain external environment.

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.

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.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S Wright', written in a cursive style.

Mr Simon Wright
Academic Registrar