

Academic & Student Support Services  
Academic Registrar  
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*Simon Wright LLB*



Sent by email to [j.g.wakefield@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:j.g.wakefield@exeter.ac.uk)

10 December 2015

Dear Professor Wakefield,

**Re: Institutional Response: External Examiner Annual Report 2014 – 2015**

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

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.

**Issue(s) Highlighted:**

1. Your observations on the assessment associated with the Placement Year including your suggestion of improvement in the clarity of the marking criteria for students, their Placement Supervisors and for those academics within the School marking the projects;
2. Your report of the recurrent use of similar questions in one examination;
3. Your reiterated comments on the high weighting afforded to the examination;
4. Your observations on the structure of final year examination papers and encouragement for the second marking of all failed examination questions;
5. Your suggestion to include advice on plagiarism in the Student Handbook based on the information provided in other School documentation
6. Your observation of the tension between students finding placements outside of Cardiff University and those who choose to remain in the School for their placement year and associated comments.

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

1. As the group going out on PTY are generally a self-selecting, highly-motivated group, and also considering many spend a year in a research environment,

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involved in presentations of their work and even writing papers, the School is not overly concerned by the high supervisor marks achieved by these students. Supervisors are guided through the marking criteria by the PTY tutor (a member of academic staff from Cardiff) during the PTY visit, so the School is confident that the supervisor mark is robust. We feel the marks achieved are representative of the quality of the students' work.

The individual case cited with the poor Project result was indeed an excellent student, but one who did not follow the clear guidelines for the structure of the report. Students are advised on the format of the report within the student handbook. The School has, however, reviewed these guidelines to ensure that there can be no ambiguity within them. It is also one of the specific duties of the PTY Tutor from the School to discuss the format of the project report with both the Student and the Supervisor during the Placement visit. The format and the marking criteria are discussed in detail at this point. Students therefore get extensive one-to-one specific guidance of the format of the project and the expectations of the assessment. The PTY tutor is a point of contact within the School should they have any questions about the assessment guidelines. Sadly, on occasion, students do not seem to follow these guidelines or this advice, as was the case in this past academic year.

As of 2015/16, the weighting of the assessments will be 20% for the supervisor mark and 60% for the project, in recognition of the amount of work undertaken by the student during the PTY placement which cannot be captured in the report.

2. The School makes clear to staff that questions should be re-used only in very rare circumstances and will ensure that guidance is emphasised strongly in 2015/16, and will monitor any potential repeats of questions, so that they are identified and prevented.
3. The 20/80% split was agreed by the School's Learning and Teaching Committee several years ago, in order to reflect the importance of being able to guarantee that the majority of the assessment for a Final Year module was the student's own work, and was testing their analytical abilities. The Unified Schemes Board (Board of Studies) and Learning and Teaching Committee will discuss this matter again. It will not be possible to enact any changes in weighting for the 2015/16 session, as the modules (and their assessments) are already embedded within the SIMS system, but if deemed appropriate, changes to weightings of coursework could be brought-in for 2016/17.

There is already some flexibility in the proportions of marks allocated to coursework and exams, for example BI3114 (Conservation Biology) and BI3135 (Bioinformatics) already have higher % weightings for the coursework (40% and 70% respectively), reflective of the extensive nature of the coursework component in these modules.

4. The standard format of 2 x 90min questions from a choice of 5 was brought in several years ago, in order to provide parity and equivalence between all final year module exams. Prior to this, some modules had an option of 2 x 90 mins from a choice of 4 and others 3 x 1 hour from a choice of 6, which was felt to be too inconsistent. However, in 2013, partly due to requests from some staff who felt that 2 x 90 min questions was inappropriate for their subject area, and partly due to External Examiner advice, the format was changed to have more flexibility. Exam Papers may now be either (i) 2 from 5, (ii) 3 from 6 or (iii) 2 from 5 with a compulsory data-analysis/interpretation section. Module Teams are able to choose which format they feel is most appropriate for the needs of their module. A small number of modules have adopted the 3 from 6 model; the majority have kept the 2 from 5 model. At least two modules in 2015/16 will be adopting the data interpretation model. We feel that it is important to allow Module Teams to make the choice relative to their subject areas (some of which are more suited to 60-minute questions, others to 90-minute questions).

The scrutiny process for exam essays is that the scrutineer should review all Failed answers and 10% of all other answers (or a minimum of 10 scripts) across the remaining mark range. The scrutineer is supposed to read each essay in full and comment upon the appropriateness of the marker's comments, and whether they align with the final mark. All Failed exam essays are therefore reviewed in detail. The scrutineer is already, in most cases, a person who is closely-associated with the subject area (certainly one who can provide an informed assessment of the quality of the answer), and so would already be well-placed to confirm that a fail mark is appropriate.

5. The School will revise the advice given to students for key assessments (e.g. PTY and Final Year Project) to reflect these recommendations and highlight the significance of Unfair Practice.
6. The decision to allow internal PTY placements was taken c.3 years ago. The School Board recently decided to continue offering internal PTY placements for the near future, but with the provisos that: a) students will be advised very strongly that an external placement is in their best interests; b) Any internal PTY placements should be advertised in order to provide a competition for the best student; c) Internal PTY students should be able to prove that they have attempted to obtain external PTY places, or have some other pressing reason to remain in Cardiff (e.g. due to particular personal or financial pressures). We will be restricting the number of internal PTY places in 2016/17, and phasing them out entirely with the proposed implementation of an integrated Masters year (which will run first in 2017/18, if validated successfully).

The School is also investigating the possibility of developing reciprocal arrangements with other institutions for PTY places; potentially (as an initial

pilot) between the GW4 group of universities and would welcome your advice and experience in these developments.

Your comment regarding the University regulations for condonement modules have been noted. Condonement of failed modules has operated for the past two years and was introduced following a University-wide consultation on a range of assessment-related issues and award rules. The condonement of failed modules only occurs under circumstances prescribed by Senate Regulations and I attach to the foot of this letter the applicable Senate Regulation detailing these circumstances. The University has reviewed the outcomes of its new award rules and has concluded that there has been no significant perturbation to award outcomes.

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

1. Your positive indications regarding the programme structure, academic standards and assessment process;
2. Your encouragement for the optional Professional Placement Year. The School confirms that it currently has approximately 25% of Year 2 students undertaking a PTY, and that it continues to promote this to all students throughout Years 1 and 2. Opportunities are also promoted for students to gain experience during the summer vacation through the School's our 'Employability Advisor', whose role is to support students in obtaining work-related experiences;
3. Your particular commendation of the Biosciences Student Office and Education Staff and your confirmation that information associated with the assessment process was provided in a timely fashion;
4. Your commendation of the orientation students get prior to organising their PTY placements and of the re-orientation received during the 2-day Gregynog retreat.

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.

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

Yours sincerely,



Mr Simon Wright  
Academic Registrar

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### Extract from Senate Regulations for Modular Undergraduate Programmes

#### Condonement

**8.3** In addition to 8.2 above, an Examining Board shall award a student Credit in Module(s) to permit Progression / Award where a Module Mark of 35%, 36%, 37%, 38% or 39% has been achieved, provided that all of the below conditions are satisfied:

- .1 the Module(s) is being assessed as a first attempt; AND
- .2 the student has failed no more than the condonable limits specified in the table below:

Programme Duration (in years)	Credit that can be condoned in one Year of Study (maximum)	Credit that can be condoned in a Programme (maximum)
1 or 2	20	20
3 or above	20	60

AND

- .3 the student's Level/Year Result in that Level/Year of study, in all contributing Modules, is at least 45%; AND
- .4 the Module(s) is/are NOT Required Module(s); AND
- .5 in the case of a Module where a qualifying mark is required for one or more Assessment components, the qualifying mark(s) HAS/HAVE been achieved.

In such circumstances, the Module Mark (35%, 36%, 37%, 38% or 39%) confirmed by the Examining Board shall not be changed and shall be used, where applicable, in calculating any award classification. Examining Boards are not permitted to change individual Module Marks.

**8.4** Condonement shall not operate:

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- .1 in Module(s) being assessed as second or third attempts; OR
- .2 where a student has failed more Credits than indicated in the table above; OR
- .3 in Required Modules;
- .4 in the case of a Module where a qualifying mark is required for one or more Assessment components, the qualifying mark(s) has/have NOT been achieved.