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Sent by email to Dr Graziella Iossa

16 March 2020

Dear Dr Iossa,

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

I am writing further to the receipt of your report for MRes in Biosciences / MRes in Stem Cell Neurobiology (stage 1).

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. Advance material provided before the start of the BIT010 Data Handling in Statistics and Bioinformatics module.
3. Procedures for agreeing a final mark when the difference between markers is more than 10% is an example of good practice.
4. The BIT011 Key Skills in Research Practice module is an example of best practice, particularly the grant proposal assignment.
5. The students spoke positively about the support they receive from the course organisers and the administration team.
6. The processes for preparation and induction of new external examiners.
7. The integration of scientific writing but also science communication for the lay public.
8. The electronic feedback provided on many assignments in Turnitin.
9. The care taken by the course organisers and administration team in putting together a programme appropriate to Masters level whilst considering the students' perspective.



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

1. **Programme Structure:** *More practicals would be welcome in the Research Techniques module.*

The Board has agreed that this would be beneficial for students and has decided to pursue two routes to achieve this goal over the Summer 2019: a) to contact a colleague who has previously organised a CRISPR/Cas9 practical; b) to discuss with Heads of Research Hubs, specifically, Imaging and Single Cell Analysis, how to run meaningful demonstrations for small groups of students. These demonstrations would be linked to specific essays / coursework. There was insufficient time to implementing any changes from 2019/20. We are currently reviewing BIT002 module and new practicals are at the heart of the changes that we will seek to implement.

2. **Programme Structure:** *Explore future MRes programmes in more restricted fields, such as Global Change Biology, Ecology or Immunity and Infection.*

The 2019/20 academic year saw the first intake of students for the MSc course in Global Change. Three additional MSc courses are under development by the College of Biomedical and Life Sciences (Drug Discovery, Big Data, Neuroscience).

3. **Programme Structure:** *Explore the possibility of placing some assessment deadlines earlier on in Stage 1 to alleviate pressure and allow for iterative learning.*

The Board has considered the recurring issue of optimal timetabling. As a consequence, BIT002 lectures have moved earlier for 2019/20, starting during BIT010's week-long gap between statistics and bioinformatics. A timetable of submission deadlines for the entire MRes course would be produced in good time for the start of the session.

4. **Programme Structure:** *Provide additional background material ahead of the bioinformatics sessions to allow students to familiarise themselves with the Linux environment.*

To ease the initial work load, provide preparatory materials, and relieve some time in the taught schedule we will convert the initial taught session (Day 1) into a self-study activity with formative online assessment in advance of the course. This has been provided during the new introduction to bioinformatics at the beginning of the 2019/20 module weeks prior to commencing the taught bioinformatics sessions. Early feedback from the students is very positive.

5. **Programme Structure:** *Provide stem cell datasets for the for the statistics mini project for students on the MRes Stem Cell Neurobiology.*

The Board has confirmed that students often ask for more data sets for BIT010 but due to a limit on teaching/marking resources there was no scope to mark multiple sets; in addition, there is a need for standardisation. Nevertheless, currently the BIT010 module leader together with a BIT018 module leader is exploring a possibility of providing an alternative dataset. At the same time, we are better explaining to all students, regardless of their research interest, that the topic of the data sets used is not relevant for their usefulness for generally applicable statistical analysis.

6. **Assessment Process:** *Intensive laboratory work in the Stem Cell Techniques in Neuroscience module created unintended pressure, which had to be compensated for by scaling.*

The Board has acknowledged this by agreeing to remove one coursework assessment from the BIT018 module to ease the pressure on the students.

7. **Noteworthy Practice and Enhancement:** *Need for improved communication between staff, especially around timetabling and deadlines.*

The Board is aware that there is a need for constant monitoring of effectiveness of communication and improvements or adjustments when necessary. Timetables and the handbook are independently reviewed. The team is fairly small and it has not changed in 3 years, which is helping to improve communication.

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,



Mr Simon Wright
Academic Registrar

