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Sent by email to steve.tear@york.ac.uk

16 August 2016

Dear Dr Tear,

Re: Institutional Response: External Examiner Annual Report 2015–2016

I am writing further to the receipt of your External Examiner's Report for the BSc/MPhys in Physics and physics-related degree programmes.

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. Your detailed comments and suggestions on Continual Assessment (CA) and its examination.
2. Your detailed observations and recommendations on Year 4 Projects;

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

1. The University is currently supporting a major initiative looking at all aspects of assessment and feedback, and the School of Physics and Astronomy has thoroughly engaged with these matters.

CA in earlier years is a useful tool to provide students with simple exercise material to help engagement with learning and provide some feedback on progress but we acknowledge that the nature of CA in "taught modules"

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must change at higher levels, where CA must be designed to test deeper understanding and also test a range of learning outcomes and skills different from those assessed in formal examinations. The review is ongoing but it is also urgent.

In the coming academic year:

- the School will provide External Examiners with module marks showing both exam and CA components.
 - the School will provide Externals with samples of CA work and their marking.
 - CA marks as well as examination marks will be discussed at Examining Boards to further raise awareness amongst teaching staff of the need to moderate CA marks.
 - the School will reassess its guidance to Module Organisers on the form and volume of CA, on assessment criteria and on feedback to students.
2. The School fully acknowledges the concerns expressed over the lack of transparency with the Year 4 project mark assigned by the Project Supervisor (20% of the overall mark) and also notes the comments that the External Examiners expressed particular concern with the projects undertaken by Astrophysics or Physics with Astronomy students. As a minimum for the next session the School will:
- require supervisors to set out full and clear aims and objectives with specified goals at the outset of the each project and against which they can assess student progress.
 - review assessment criteria to provide objective criteria against which marks can be awarded (with justification).
 - adopt the proposal for requiring students to keep a project notebook which is view on a regular basis and forms part of the assessment.

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 particular commendation of the contribution of project work to the Programmes and your indication that students find project work very rewarding;
3. your indication that the Programmes exceed the core requirements of the Institute of Physics;
4. your confirmation that recent changes to the Programmes have been well designed and managed to benefit student learning and knowledge development.

I hope that you will find this response satisfactory and we thank you for your continued support of the programme.

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.

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