

INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE: EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT 2012-2013 - MScEcon in International Relations and also the MSc International Relations (Turin)

Dear Professor Hayden,

I am writing further to your External Examiner's report for the above programme(s). Your Report has been considered by the Cardiff School of European Languages, Translation and Politics 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

Your Report raised issue(s) which have been referred for consideration by the School.

1. **[6] your indication that "the extent of feedback provided to students did vary, with some staff providing extensive and detailed feedback while others were rather brief";**
2. **[6] your encouragement for "a move from handwritten feedback";**
3. **[3] your request "to be provided at the start of the academic year (or each semester) with a list of all the key dates [for receipt of] exam question papers, exam scripts and essay samples, as far as is practicable";**
4. **[6] the suggested "formal use of assessed oral presentations".**

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

1. *"The Politics Department aims to give high quality feedback to all students on all of its modules. This feedback takes several forms, including verbal face-to-face feedback and marginal comments alongside the body of the essay. Often, an external examiner sees only the summary feedback comments on a separate feedback sheet / at the end of the essay as the bulk of marginal comments are returned to the student with the essay. However, the Head of Politics, is convening a working group to look at our assessment more broadly and this will be looking closely at our feedback practices. In doing so it will be building on the work of our existing student focus group on Politics feedback."*

2. *"Additionally, several members of staff are trialling full electronic marking through Grademark on Turnitin this year. One driver for this trial is a desire to move to all typewritten feedback in the most efficient and effective way."*

3. *"There are some practical issues with providing very exact information. All externals should be provided with the exam board dates and the dates of the exam periods. This information will, in future if it hasn't in the past, be accompanied with some contextual information about how the flow of work would typically map onto these dates. Being more precise than this is not possible until the exam timetables are published for each period and that does not happen until late in each semester."*

4. *"In the past, we have deployed the formal assessment of seminar presentations, but encountered several practical problems."*

If the assessed seminar presentation only constituted a small proportion of the overall Module mark (say 10%), then students were disinclined to treat it seriously, but if it counted for a rather higher percentage of the overall Module mark, some students would claim that they would be disadvantaged, because they were 'too shy' or lacking in self-esteem to read out a formal presentation in the presence of other students. Certainly, students from some social backgrounds are much more

confident about speaking in front of others, and thus might be deemed to have an unfair advantage over students whose educational or family backgrounds have not inculcated the same self-confidence.

There was also an equality and diversity issue, in that the IR Masters in particular attracts a high proportion of overseas students, some of whom emanate from cultures or regimes where speaking openly in front of others is not expected, and may even be dangerous - particularly if these involve critiquing concepts and ideas, and questioning established orthodoxies (which is what a formal seminar presentation might entail, depending on the Question).

Finally, there is the problem of 'objective' or verifiable measurement. With a written essay, there is a clear marking criteria which the tutor can refer to in determining the final mark or grade, and also explain to the student why a particular mark was awarded.

Similarly, with a Class Test, there are a series of 'correct' or 'incorrect' factual questions.

However, with an assessed seminar presentation, it might be more difficult to make an accurate assessment of the quality of the presentation, in terms of awarding, say, 6/10 or 7/10. Again, we encountered the problem of students whose argumentation, in terms of identifying the key facts, events or concepts, was very good, but whose actual verbal delivery was poor (nervousness? shyness? cultural reticence?). It repeatedly proved difficult for the tutors to award a specific mark in such circumstances.

Moreover, a student who receives a low mark for their seminar presentation may then claim they have been treated unfairly (discrimination?) or more harshly than other students, particularly if that student has a particular cultural, ethnic, social or sexual characteristic, which might then prompt an appeal or litigation on the grounds of being treated differently or unfairly. Even if such an appeal subsequently proves groundless, it would place unfair pressure on the member of staff subject to such an allegation, and possibly attract damaging publicity for the university if such an allegation was reported to the media, regardless of the final outcome.

Certainly, students were more likely to challenge the mark awarded by a tutor for a seminar presentation than they were a mark awarded for a written piece of work.

One other point to emphasise is that with other formally assessed pieces of written work, there is 'evidence' which can be conveyed to the External Examiner, whereas with a seminar presentation, it is merely the tutor's professional judgement as to what mark to award, without any independent or external validation or verification. In an era and climate when we are exhorted to ensure accountability and transparency, this too is an important consideration."

Positive Comments

The School and University are pleased to note your positive comments on the School's provision including:

- a. **[1, 2 and 3] your positive indications regarding the programme structure, academic standards and assessment process;**
- b. **[1] your indication that the range and depth of modules are "certainly comparable with the very best institutions in this field";**
- c. **[6] your indication that you were impressed "by the diversity of assessment strategies that were used" and your commendation for staff on the "robust and rigorous process of internal moderation"**

I hope that you will find this response satisfactory and thank you for your service as External Examiner.

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 Registry web pages and will be available publically.

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.

Mrs Jill Bedford
Director of Registry and Academic Services