



Academic & Student Support Services
Gwasanaethau Academaidd a Chefnogi Myfyrwyr
Registry
Y Gofrestrfa
Academic Registrar Cofrestrdydd 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 Professor Simon leather

13 September 2019

Dear Professor Leather,

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

I am writing further to the receipt of your report for BSc and MBIol Biological Sciences.

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 extent of student feedback on scripts and assignments.
3. I was very impressed by the assignment in BI3156 Systems Biology & Modelling and equally impressed by the abilities of the top students on that module.

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

1. **Programme Structure:** *Large number of students registered on some of the final year modules, which may prevent effective interaction with both staff and peers in class discussions involving all students.*

We agree that increased numbers on modules is not ideal, however there are logistical issues that restrict our ability to provide this. In particular this is an issue as just under 50% of the year cohort are students in Biomedical Sciences. Where we have modules with larger cohorts we were proactive



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in ensuring that such modules provided a range of small-group activities (tutorials, workshops, discussion groups, etc) that comprised smaller groups of students. However it was noted that in the 2018/19 academic year these small group sessions were poorly attended by students.

2. **Programme Structure:** *Suitability of literature reviews as final year projects.*

The School offers a range of projects to final year BSc students, including practical, literature, science engagement and pedagogic projects, reflecting student demand and interest. We actively encourage students to select projects that suit their interests and career goals. Literature based projects are actively chosen particularly by the significant number of students who do not intend to pursue a career in practical science. They previously represented approximately 25% of all projects. Laboratory practical projects for the previous 3 years accounted for c.70% of the projects allocated (see table below). However, in this academic year the proportion decreased to 60.72%.

	15/16	%	16/17	%	17/18	%	+ IM	%	18/19	%	+ IM	%
Practical	251	69.92	260	72.42	239	69.08	276	72.06	218	60.72	251	64.03
Literature	97	27.02	88	24.51	89	25.72	89	23.24	120	33.43	120	30.61
Sci Engagement / Pedagogic	11	3.06	11	3.06	18	5.20	18	4.70	21	5.85	21	5.36
	359		359		346		383		359		392	

It should be noted that the proportion of students undertaking practical projects will appear slightly deflated due to the fact that some students are enrolled on Module BI3008, the Research Project for the students on the Integrated Masters track. Previously these students would all have opted for (and most likely been allocated) a practical lab project. Taking these into consideration, the proportion of students undertaking practical projects in 2018/19 increases to 64.03%. It should also be noted that in each year there are a small number of students undertaking Pedagogic projects, which are empirical projects with data gathering and analysis (albeit not in Bioscience Lab environments). Including these practical projects increases the proportion of practical projects to 67.09%

The reduction in the number of students choosing a practical project is a matter for us to evaluate, and determine whether this is due to a reduction in the number of projects offered of each type, student choice, or the numbers of students allocated to the each project type.

Guidelines to staff and the marking criteria for literature projects are carefully written to try to ensure that different types of project are marked to an equivalent level. A key factor with literature projects, however, is that often they are taken as an option by the less-capable students, who will by default be more likely to produce a report of a lower standard. So the issue with equivalence may be impacted by the ability of the students undertaking the literature project itself. Certainly over recent years there have been examples of literature projects run as meta-analyses which have been of publication standard.

3. **Academic Standards:** *Some students are still submitting projects containing 'Excel' graphs that had not been edited to conform to scientific conventions.*

We specifically address the presentation of figures in Year 1, and for most students this is re-addressed in Year 2. However, the optionality of modules in Year 2 means that there is no way to be certain that all students have the same experience regarding this key skill. We are looking into ways of ensuring that certain key academic, scientific, presentation, and communication skills are delivered uniformly in Year 2, which may include the revision of the Year 2 curriculum to introduce a core 'research skills' module undertaken by all students. We are also investigating approaches that could be run through the personal tutor system. However, as with all such teaching activities, they are conditional on students engaging with them, and/or engaging with feedback provided on coursework in Years 1 and 2, which could also cause students to lack this awareness in the Final Year.

4. **The Assessment Process:** *There was one module, BI3136 Global Climate Change Ecology, where one question was noticeably unpopular. I was unable to see any reason why this question was avoided but perhaps the School might consider looking into the matter.*

Having discussed this with the module team, it appears that the two exam questions that had few students answering them were (a) An exam question which focused on the broader conceptual framework at the start of the module, and (b) A question which integrated concepts across a range of lecturers' content. The explanation seems to be that the students appear to have focused their revision on the more case-based individual contributions of staff, rather than the cross-cutting principles. The module team will highlight these more in the 2019/20 run of the module, and emphasise that such aspects could be the subject of exam questions.

5. **The Assessment Process:** *There is some variability in how online feedback is used by the markers on the same module.*

We have tried to standardise the feedback given to students as follows:

- (a) Use of a rubric to generate the mark, which also contains descriptors of how the student has addressed key skills.
- (b) Encouraging all staff to include the following in the 'overall summary' comments: '3 things you did well', '3 things you could improve on' and '1 key thing to remember for future assessments'. However, we did not have the resources to ensure that all staff complied with this.
- (c) Minimal use of the in-text comment facility, to focus on key concepts rather than minutiae of spelling, grammatical or sense errors.

We will be reiterating this guidance in 2019/20, and hope to monitor its adoption more closely.

Issues highlighted in your report and response provided by Registry:

6. ***Year-on-Year Comments:*** *No response to the comments in last year's report.*

We apologise for the long delay in providing an institutional response to your previous report. This has since been sent, and you should have received this on the 24th June. We will work with the School to ensure you receive a timely response in future.

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