

Academic & Student Support Services
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Simon Wright LLB



Sent by email to g.j.holloway@reading.ac.uk

05 April 2016

Dear Dr Holloway,

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 Biology / Zoology / Ecology (Whole Organism Biology, Zoology and Ecology) dated 22 February 2016.

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 report of student comments on the varying level of supervisory input at the project stage
2. your report of student perceptions regarding the level of module choice in Ecology
3. your report that students considered that some third year classes were too large;
4. your report of student perceptions that feedback deadlines are occasionally missed;
5. the student suggestion to extend the PTY to include non-research positions.

The following response has been provided in consultation with the School:

1. This is a perennial matter with students, caused largely by the fact that there are a large number of different project types within the School, supervised by approximately 100 members of staff. Each of these will have different supervisory styles, and differential structures to their research groups. We aim to provide a standard level for the minimum expected supervision, but some students may require more supervision than others, and some less, and so it is impossible to have absolute equity in this regard. Communications to staff aim to standardise the supervisory input as much as possible, especially in regard to feedback on draft reports.

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2. There are currently four modules in the Final Year with a direct Ecology focus, with 2 more having strong leanings towards Ecology. Similarly there are approximately 10 staff who have strong research programmes in Ecology, ranging from microbial ecology, to plant ecology, animal populations, conservation, ecosystems and global change, all of whom offer Final Year Projects. Given this, the School has commented that it is a misconception by the students that there is not a sufficient range of ecology optional choices;
3. The mean and median class size for the final year is 50 students. The School monitors class sizes very carefully and has imposed a maximum class size of 100 for the Final Year as of 2015/16. This has resulted in the largest module (BI3314) being split into two parallel modules for 2015/16. A small number of other modules are near to the upper limit that the School would consider viable as Final Year modules, but are not so large as to be detrimental to learning. The School is also monitoring numbers for one particular module where changes to module optionality and an unexpected level of programme transfers has led to a recent dramatic growth in student numbers.
4. The School maintains a detailed record on feedback deadlines and can confirm that for Preliminary Year, Year 2, and Final Year during 2014/15 it met 106 out of 118 deadlines, and that feedback was on average released 7.2 days before the deadline.

For the 2015/16 academic year to date, out of 107 Coursework items CW 105 were returned on or before the feedback deadline and Coursework has been returned on average 4.07 days ahead of the feedback deadline.

The School concludes that while there were a small number of missed deadlines, the vast majority of feedback was returned on time, or substantially before the published deadline, during 2014/15 and that the rates have improved even more in 2015/16.

5. The School is looking into as part of the University's Periodic Review process this academic year. The aim is to try to widen the range of placements that can be approved for the PTY, including some non-research-based placements, using the BSc Biotechnology degree as a model for such placements. However, the School will be mindful not to compromise the academic standards of the PTY experience, as it contributes 10% of the award for BSc degrees. Students also have the option of taking a year's Interruption of Study for work experience, if they choose to. This is an option for placements which currently do not meet the requirements for a PTY (namely to have an identifiable research project for the student), and so this is a further option for placements for students.

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 confirmation of the responsiveness of the School to comments raised by External Examiners last year;
3. your particular commendation of the Professional Training Year and of its positive impact on employability.

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.

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

Yours sincerely,



Mr Simon Wright
Academic Registrar