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**Sent by email to Professor Paola Pedarzani**

**08 November 2019**

Dear Professor Pedarzani,

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

I am writing further to the receipt of your report for the BSc Biomedical Sciences (Neuroscience; Physiology).

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. Marker made a good use of the full range of marks.
3. Annotations on the exam scripts were very useful to understand how marks were allocated in most modules.
4. Very good practice in marking final year projects, with a well-balanced set of components and thorough comments and reports by supervisors and second markers.
5. Excellent advance planning of dates, comprehensive briefing and provision of relevant information on the Programmes of study and the changes implemented in the last year.
6. Outstanding support by the Deputy School Manager, the Director of Undergraduate Education and his staff throughout the process.



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

1. **Programme Structure:** *The availability of subject specific modules in Neuroscience in the final year is limited compared to other institutions.*

The provision of Neuroscience content in Year 2 equates to 80 out of 120 Credits. In addition, there is neuroscience content in several other modules typically taken by neuroscience students (e.g. Concepts of Disease, Physiology). There is also a 'Week-long Research Experience' in January, which is a full week of lab-based practical work dedicated to Neuroscience. We have an additional week-long research experience for Neuroscience (focusing on Neuroanatomy) in development for introduction in 2020/21. These Week-long Research Experiences are outside of the modular structure, but provide the students with c.35 hours of contact time each (the equivalent contact time of a 15 credit module) and focus on practical skills and data interpretation

In Year 3 there are 2 x 30 credit modules for Neuroscience, but again there is also Neuroscience content in Contemporary Topics in Disease and Advanced Physiology/Pathophysiology. In addition, Neuroscience students typically undertake neuroscience-related projects in the Final Year Project module.

We feel this is sufficient content for the degree to be valid, and this was accepted by the critical friend, external assessor, and validation panel when the new curriculum was validated in 2016. However, we will look at comparator courses for a wider overview.

2. **Academic Standards:** *A high proportion of 1st class degree marks in the BSc Neuroscience; This will need to be monitored in the coming years, especially in view of the new breakdown of marks in the modules (60% final exam and 40% coursework) in order to prevent mark inflation.*

The number of 1<sup>st</sup> Class degrees in Neuroscience has fluctuated over recent years, and this year's high proportion (32.6%) is unusual.

Previous years' proportions of 1<sup>st</sup> Class awards were as follows:

2017/18	21.3%
2016/17	17.8%
2015/16	14.3%
2014/15	45.5%
2013/14	12.0%
2012/13	35.3%

However there are also Intercalated Medical Students on the Final Year of BSc Neuroscience, who are typically high-achieving students (almost exclusively gain 1st/2(1) degrees). So if those are excluded from the calculation then the proportions are as follows:

2018/19	24.3%
2017/18	18.6%
2016/17	12.8%
2015/16	9.1%
2014/15	25.0%
2013/14	5.3%
2012/13	15.4%

The % of 1<sup>st</sup> class degrees for 2018/19 was inflated partly (though not completely) by 6 out of 7 intercalated medical students gaining 1<sup>st</sup> Class degrees.

The number of 1<sup>st</sup> Class outcomes in 2017/18 and 2018/19 is closer to what we would expect from our overall cohort (c.20%), and indeed we were criticised by our previous Neuroscience External Examiner for not awarding enough 1<sup>st</sup> Class degrees in Neuroscience. However, the proportion is slightly higher than we would typically expect and aim for, so we will monitor this in 2019/20 and beyond to ensure that this is not an endemic trend caused by the modular structure.

3. ***The Assessment Process:*** *In relation to final year projects, students who could not perform the experiments described (or part of them) because of extenuating circumstances or other issues should clearly specify what was done by them and what was contributed by others in a dedicated paragraph in their final thesis.*

This is an important point, and will be emphasised in the Module Handbook for the Final Year Project, and reiterated to Project Supervisors.

4. ***Year-on-Year Comments:*** *It would be very useful if external examiners could be given access to the project dissertations and their assessment a couple of weeks before the Exam Board Meeting.*

This is an excellent proposal. Under the new timetable, the Final Year projects will be submitted in early-mid March, with marking complete by mid-April. Once this process has been completed we will be able to make the Final Year Project module available (along with a summary of the projects undertaken, sorted by subject area of the Supervisors) to External Examiners to review around the end of April, and prior to the Exam Board in June.

5. ***Year-on-Year Comments:*** *It would be very useful for the external examiners to have bar diagrams with grade distributions for each module's*

*exam (contributing 60%), coursework assessment (contributing 40%) and final module marks.*

Due to the volume of work undertaken by our module teams and professional services staff around the time of the exam boards, we cannot guarantee that we would be able to provide this level of detail (in particular if some modules were to be scheduled very late in the exam period). We will request that this information is included in the module reports generated centrally from the student management system (SIMS), but we cannot guarantee that this will be possible. We will try our best to provide this information if SIMS is unable to offer it, however, and will consult with External Examiners over what statistical information they require. But there are resource limitations that may mean that this is not possible.

6. ***Year-on-Year Comments:*** *It would be very useful if 'samples' of scripts for every module (plus a summary spreadsheet with all marks and stats) could be pre-selected for external examiners.*

We will aim to do this for the next academic session, and will consult with External Examiners over the coming year on what ranges of scripts they would like to review for each module, and in what quantities.

#### **Issues highlighted in your report and the response provided by Registry:**

7. ***Year-on-Year Comments:*** *Inconvenient format of data provided at Exam Boards.*

Schools continue to have access to a standard set of reports that the University provides. The reports are set to meet the needs of all Schools and provide an appropriate baseline to allow examining Boards to function comparably and consistently across the University. We appreciate that Schools will want the information presented to them in a number of different ways including information that falls outside of the scope of the standard business object reports. We continue to work with Schools to enhance the available reports to meet their needs, however we regret that there is limited capacity to make bespoke reports with unique specifications for each of the University's 24 Schools.

Where Schools wish to create their own reports to represent the data in a format of their choosing, then any resource implications will need to be considered and appropriately managed by the Head of School. Schools can seek advice and guidance on how best to utilise and manage institutional data from their College Data Analyst.

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,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Simon Wright', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Mr Simon Wright  
Academic Registrar