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Sent by email to Professor W Michael L Holcombe

06 February 2020

Dear Professor Holcombe,

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

I am writing further to the receipt of your report for the BSc Computer Science programmes and BSc Applied Software Engineering.

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 teaching of practical software is innovative and successful.
3. The proposed “guidelines for setter and moderators of assessment” is a very good start to help standardise and increase the challenge of exam papers and coursework.
4. Module statistics are presented well.
5. The individual project website is very useful.
6. The group project with real clients is very good, and should be extended to the Computer Science programme.

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

1. **Academic Standards:** *Grade inflation remains a big problem, and undermines the reputation of the Cardiff degree.*



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The School continues to work towards addressing this issue but recognises that grade inflation is not something that can be solved in a single academic year, requiring a gradual and evidence-based response. The % of firsts awarded did decline this year compared to last year as this process started to have an effect.

As discussed last year, a working group was convened to look at the level, type and content of the final year assessments. It is worth noting that due to the structure of our final year the recommendations and findings from this group were not able to be acted upon during this academic year, as the bulk of taught modules are in the Autumn semester, with the Spring semester taken up with the final year project and a single taught module.

This working group reported back to the Teaching, Learning and Academic Quality Committee (TLAQC) during Spring semester and found from a statistical analysis of assessment performance that there is no single cause of the increased number of firsts. There is a statistically significant difference between the performance of students who have been on placement and those who have not, with placement students performing significantly better. Whether this is caused by the action of going out on placement or a reflection of the better students being able to gain placements is unclear, but it is unsurprising that given this relationship an increase in the number of students successfully gaining placements (as the School has seen in recent years) would lead to an increase in performance in the final year.

The working group has produced guidance for staff around the setting of assessments, which makes staff aware of the proportion of assessments that should be set at different levels (recall, application, synthesis) and provides information on the level of detail required for marking criteria. This guidance was made available prior to the setting of assessments for the 19/20 academic year, it is expected that this will result in a change in the assessments set during this year.

Additionally, for academic year 19/20 the School has implemented a new internal moderation process, which includes assessments being considered by a panel of academics. This allows assessments to be considered across the whole year for quality and level with a consistent view. The first moderation panels held will specifically be paying attention to this issue for second- and third-year modules.

2. **Assessment Process:** *Scaling of marks should be undertaken where appropriate - according to agreed guidelines.*

Scaling of marks is not covered by the Academic Regulations for 19/20. However, guidance is provided in the Cardiff University Marking Policy, which firstly defines Scaling as:

“The mathematical adjustment made to the marks achieved by a cohort of students should the distribution of marks in that assessment be noticeably different to other tasks. Scaling should not normally need to be undertaken, outside of mathematical assessments in which a markedly different set of marks can result”

It then provides the following guidance about scaling:

“In a small number of assessments, scaling may need to be undertaken to enable the distribution of marks to be made broadly comparable across different assessments on the same programme. While this is rare, and more often used in disciplines and assessments in which all students can either be awarded very high or very low marks through initial marking (e.g. in mathematical assessments), students should be informed where this is done and how it will be undertaken should it need to be undertaken.”

Given this guidance in the Marking Policy, the School does not feel that scaling should be expected to be used in anything other than rare cases, where module or assessment results are significantly out of line with other assessments. It cannot consider using scaling across the board to reduce marks and decrease the number of students in the first-class boundary. However, it is recognised that the guidance provided by the marking policy is open to interpretation, and so the School’s TLAQC will be directed to create a School policy specifying the exact circumstances within COMSC in which scaling will be applied.

3. **Assessment Process:** *Communicate outcomes from critical comments on tracking forms.*

We will look to return tracking forms to external examiners following the consideration of external examiner’s comments by assessment setters, and make the tracking forms available during external examiner visits.

4. **Assessment Process:** *Provide more detailed breakdown of marks to make clear how final mark is derived.*

With relation to the final year project marking: a working group within the School is currently looking at the structure and nature of the individual assessment components, the marking criteria, guidance to staff, and the systems and processes used to achieve final marks for the final year project. This group will look at the technical issues around changing the Project Allocation and Tracking System (PATs) to make the marking of final year projects clearer, including the justification and breakdown of marks.

For other assessments: the guidance provided to staff around the setting of assessments provides information on the level of detail required for marking criteria. Marking criteria will be considered by the new internal moderation panel process.

5. **Assessment Process:** *Inaccuracy of final results from SIMS prevent use of anonymous mark sheets.*

One of the key functions of the exam board is to check for errors, and there is concern that anonymity could hinder this process. Colleagues in Registry are investigating ways in which the exam board report could be enhanced that may address some of these concerns.

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