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Sent by email to dj@aber.ac.uk

27 February 2017

Dear Dr Jones,

Re: Institutional Response: External Examiner Annual Report 2015–2016

I am writing further to the receipt of your External Examiner's Report for the BSc in Biology / Ecology / Zoology.

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.

Issues Highlighted

1. Comments on the nature of feedback provided to students and on the disappointing number of students that actually looked at their feedback.
2. Student numbers continue to be high on some popular modules in year 3 / impact of large class numbers can impact on student experience and staff.

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

1. The School will take on board comments concerning the importance of writing positive feedback on good work, and it is useful to consider feedback that specifically states its aim of helping students improve their work – this does occur, as you indicates, but the School must ensure that it is consistent across modules.

The School also needs to try to publicise feedback to students, although it is difficult to do so even more without seeming ridiculous. Only 30% of students

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actually view their feedback. The School has tried to address this by introducing further training in enrolment week for students on use of Grademark for accessing feedback, and will continue to publicise feedback details over the academic year. As you have indicated, it is very frustrating to be rated poorly on delivery of feedback in NSS when only 30% of the cohort have actually looked at it.

2. As you have emphasised, the work produced from large classes is of equivalent standard to smaller ones, although clearly the interaction with staff, and the student experience, is potentially better in smaller groups, along with reduced workload for staff. Currently module size is very variable in year 3, unavoidably so in the current structure. The new degree structure, which will be applied to year 3 from 2018-2019, has 18 modules with a standard pattern of teaching, student work and assessment which are expected to have a reasonably even distribution of student numbers. An appropriate number of staff will be assigned to each to achieve a balance between full size lectures and smaller group tutorial work.

Additional comments / observations

Your comments on University conventions on the rounding of marks have been noted. The Definition of Generic Terms Used in Senate Regulations provide the basis for rounding marks used to classify awards. The following definitions are used:

Module Mark: The total mark for an individual Module, calculated according to the weightings for each component summative assessment specified in the Module description, rounded and recorded as a whole number. The marks for the component summative assessments will be whole numbers between 0 and 100.

Year Result: The combined average of the marks for Modules / Units of Study contributing to a year of study calculated, rounded and recorded to a whole number.

Final Mark: The combined average of the Module Marks contributing to the final award, weighted according to the Classification Set for the Programme and Credit rating of the Modules calculated, rounded, and recorded as a whole number.

The above definitions, approved by the Senate, establish the process for the calculation of module marks, the final mark used to classify the award and the year result. One of the reasons for adopting the above rounding conventions was to enable students to use module marks to calculate the final mark and the degree classification. If unrounded marks were used this would not be possible.

The University is pleased to note your positive comments including:

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1. your positive indications regarding the programme structure, academic standards and assessment process
2. positive student perceptions on degree structures and content, the School and the educational experience offered;
3. use made of the upper marking range where appropriate. This is an issue for which the School has been criticised in the past. The School is continuing to address this to try to increase the proportion of very high marks being awarded where they are truly deserved;
4. improvements in referencing by students. The School started addressing this with the introduction of the new common first year. This years this cohort is the first to have gone through to graduation having taken this first year and it looks like the School's concentration on key scientific skills has paid off.
5. preparation and induction of External Examiners;
6. consistent, clear and thorough annotations on coursework and clear marking criteria and feedback to students;
7. staff research backgrounds having a positive influence on teaching via examples used and standard of work expected;
8. excellent and challenging coursework for Conservation Biology BI3114 and 'Real life' insight and professional critical training in the coursework for BI3110 Assessing the Environment.

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,



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