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**Sent by email to [mark.stevens@roslin.ed.ac.uk](mailto:mark.stevens@roslin.ed.ac.uk)**

**14 April 2016**

Dear Professor Stevens,

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

I am writing further to the receipt of your External Examiner's Report for the MRes Biosciences.

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 comments highlighting whether projects pose potential risks to the candidates (e.g. owing to inter-dependence of objectives, expertise available in support of the project, feasibility in timeframe with available resources etc.) and related suggestions;
2. Your suggestion regarding the marking of the grant proposal in BIT011;
3. Your indication that it may be appropriate to share good practice and agree expectations for Stage 1 next year, in particular where demonstrators may be involved in assessments;
4. Your report of student concerns in relation to advanced statistics (BIT010);
5. Your report of detailed concerns in relation to marks lost for not applying a re-leveling correction in a general linear model;
6. Your suggestions regarding training in preparation and critical review of manuscripts.

**The following response has been provided on behalf of the School:**

1. The proposed projects are a component of BIT011, and are currently marked by the proposed supervisor and scrutinised by the module co-ordinator. Students can select from a list of projects, these have been approved by Division Heads with respect to expertise available to support the project and also available resources within the laboratories. It is policy within the School of

Biosciences to ensure that students are placed within research groups equipped with the necessary resources to host our research students.

Students are able to formulate their own projects but this is under the guidance of an identified member of staff with the required expertise in the proposed field of research. While health and safety 'risks' are assessed as part of the assessment, risk relating to inter-dependence of objectives and feasibility within the timeframe may not be addressed. Feedback on these two potential pitfalls would be a useful training for the student. A simple solution to this issue would be to include an additional pro-forma specifying a judgement by the primary marker (supervisor) of risk under the suggested headings:

RISK	LOW	MEDIUM	HIGH
Inter-dependence of objectives			
Feasibility in timeframe			

These projects are performed as a component of BIT014 and therefore it would be appropriate for the Risk Pro-Forma to be reviewed by the module lead for BIT014 and where high risk has been identified the module co-ordinator will discuss with the student and supervisor mechanisms to reduce the risk. Students' progress in the course of the practical work is monitored, currently at two points during the module, the first would allow sufficient time for a change in experimental design and strategy.

2. The Programme Team acknowledge this 'good practice' request for 'blind' second marking of the project proposal. It would also allow for an independent view on posed risk to the candidate (see above 1).

Implementation will be dependent on support from the Postgraduate Board and Teaching Allocation. The outcome of these requests will not be available until later in the academic year, but if successful the Programme Team will implement blind second marking for 2016-17.

3. The Programme Team acknowledges disparity in good practice and will endeavour to provide training for demonstrators to share good practice and agree expectations for feedback in all modules taught in Stage 1 of the programme.
4. These issues have been discussed at the Schemes Board and with the student representative for the course. The taught material provides a necessary baseline, and students are expected to go beyond this through independent study. The weekly R statistics clinic is available to all UG and PG students in Biosciences, and was recommended by the Module Co-ordinator as one of a range of options (also including further reading and online resources) available to those needing additional support outside class. Demonstrators assisting on the MRes module assist at the R Statistic Clinic and therefore there is continuity in the teaching and advice given to the students. There were no significant deviations from taught material, with the possible exception of the t-test / re-leveling issue discussed further below.

5. Students who did not make any statistical comparison between significant levels were, correctly, penalised, as this was a critical part of interpreting the data. Use of re-level as part of the GLM had been taught and was included in the lecture material given to students, and was the most appropriate method to use. Where students used alternative methods for comparison between levels (e.g. t-test) credit was given for correctly recognising the need for a comparison, but students were not marked as highly as those using re-level within the model. Feedback was provided explaining why the comparison was necessary in interpreting the data, but more attention will be paid in future to explaining why re-level is the most appropriate method to use in such scenarios.
6. Currently students attend a session on manuscript writing and critical review of a manuscript. In BIT014 (Practical Project) students also attend a session on writing a dissertation. The Programme Team will consider implementation of further training but outcome will be dependent on an increased teaching commitment to this course. The Graduate College offers a number of workshops that also address the training in preparation and critical review of manuscripts.

**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 particular commendation of a welcome diversity of teaching and assessment methods, of the mandatory coverage, and assessment of, scientific writing, presentation skills, ethics, statistics and of the administrative support you had for your visit.

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