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Sent by email to mark.stevens@roslin.ed.ac.uk

15 June 2017

Dear Professor Stevens,

Re: Institutional Response: External Examiner Annual Report 2016–2017

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

Issues Highlighted

1. Suggested review of the content of Module BIT002 to ensure that it is up-to-date and suited to the student intake (noting that this year over half of the cohort progressed to Ecology projects and that increased provision of methods for field provision might be appropriate).
2. Detailed criteria for award of marks at varying levels for the Grant proposal were absent and future guidance to markers akin to that provided for dissertations would be welcome.
3. Inconsistent levels of support to students on Grant proposal project outlines and suggested provision of guidance to supervisors on the expected level of engagement at this stage.
4. A need to provide clear instructions to supervisors on the levels of effort and attainment expected of students at Level 7, clarification on the extent of

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original work required for the MRes Stage II and suggestion that 'Achievement' should contribute to the overall mark for the dissertation.

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

1. The School thanks you for this recommendation and notes the specific comments from the student cohort requesting provision of teaching for methods relating to field studies. However, student requests do vary from year to year because of the nature of a mixed cohort of students with interests across the Biosciences. Indeed in previous years the School has received student comments querying why they have to do any ecology at all. With this in mind the programme team will work to maintain flexibility in this module making it fit for all those with an interest in the Biosciences. However, discussions have already commenced and the School hopes to implement interim changes for the Academic session 2017-18 with further changes for 2018-19. Changes made to Postgraduate teaching provision could be delayed whilst the School is undergoing major changes in the delivery and modules offered for Undergraduate courses.
2. As you have indicated, assessors of the Grant proposal are given very useful guidance on what to consider in each section of the proposal. This can be easily converted to a set of robust marking criteria. The programme team will implement this change for the Academic Session 2017-18. The introduction of detailed marking criteria will then be in alignment with all assessments in this module.
3. The programme team and module lead for BIT014 acknowledge the issue of inconsistent input from supervisors. For the Academic Session 2017-18, amendments will be made in the handbook giving clear guidelines to supervisor and students on the minimum input required. From initial discussion, the programme team suggest a minimum of three formal meetings, the submission of a draft proposal to Learning Central and a Pro-forma outlining a list of formal feedback points for each section of the grant proposal to be addressed by the supervisor. The supervisor will be asked to upload the completed Pro-forma to Learning Central and indicate if the proposal was based upon an existing grant proposal or was a 'new' grant proposal.

The programme team will also review the process for recording the delegation of day-to-day supervision of laboratory or field-based activities in Stage 2. In the first instance this could be recorded as part of the Grant proposal but also recorded in the Mid Stage review – an additional section could be included to capture the assessment of work from the assigned day-to-day supervisor.

4. In the School of Biosciences if a postgraduate student is not making satisfactory progress at anytime during their period of study there is a clear procedure in which a supervisor can report this at any time during the course

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of study to the Director of Postgraduate Research or for the MRes programme to the Director of Masters.

In Stage 2 of the MRes programme of study, student progress is monitored by completion of a Mid-Progress Form and it is the responsibility of the student to ensure that the form is completed with the supervisor. This form will remain in place but we will add an additional section to the form. The section will specifically ask the supervisor to allocate a preliminary assessment of student progress as GOOD, ADEQUATE or POOR. Supervisors will be asked to use the Supervisor component of the BIT014 module mark, to guide their decision. If a POOR is recorded at this Mid-Progress Stage, we will implement the Unsatisfactory Progress procedure and a Warning of Exclusion as set out in our procedures for Postgraduate Research students. A formal interview with the student and supervisor (if necessary) will be held with the Director and Deputy Director (optional) of the course. Following the interview a formal letter indicating unsatisfactory progress and any mediating actions that need to be undertaken by the student within a month (an effective Warning of Exclusion) will be issued. The supervisor will report on the progress of the student with a one-month follow-up form, which will either indicate that student progress is satisfactory and the warning can be lifted or the student will be asked to withdraw from the course. This process is in alignment with advice from REGIS.

The School thanks you for your comments regarding the inclusion of 'Achievement' as contributing to the overall mark for the dissertation but in its current form does not think that this is inappropriate. The School will review its marking criteria and its guidance regarding the requirements of an MRes dissertation.

The University is pleased to note your positive comments including:

1. your positive indications regarding the programme structure, academic standards and assessment process;
2. positive student perceptions of support provided by the School;
3. professionally administered programme with robust procedures for identifying Unfair Practice;
4. positive School responses to issues highlighted in your Annual Report for 2015-2016;

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.

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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