



Academic & Student Support Services
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Sent by email to M.J.Coe@soton.ac.uk

30 November 2016

Dear Professor Coe,

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

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

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. Bunching of coursework assessments, particularly in the period leading to the Christmas recess and related comments and suggestions.
2. Incoming MSc student reports of a lack of awareness regarding prerequisite knowledge expected of them for each course.
3. Significant timetabling issues and delayed access to course materials on Blackboard.
4. Student perceptions of overwhelming material presented in Astronomy Instrumentation.
5. Student perceptions that some of the options available were very much easier to score highly upon than other courses.
6. With growing student numbers, encouragement for conducting the Examining Board anonymously.

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

1. Students have been made aware of the likely issues arising from the combination of 3rd and 4th year modules and the Module Organisers of the “problem” modules have been contacted. This year it has not been possible to change the assessment methodology, but it will be considered if the Module Organisers are agreeable. A move to 100% exam was not favoured by students when it was mentioned to them, but a better compromise should be possible. The deadlines for PXT201 (20 credits, core) have been chosen to avoid clashes with the 3rd and 4th year electives as much as possible.
2. Students are made aware of the general content pre-requisites (i.e. headline summaries of the subject matter they will be covering), and in particular of the heavy use of Python at Cardiff, in advance of arrival. As there are many options available, a more specific list of pre-requisites will be generated and made available in future, listing the module contents (from the relevant module handbooks and course descriptors).
3. The timetabling of the two data analysis/Python modules together is an ongoing issue but students are now made aware of this at the start of the course (as this only arose after a few weeks in the initial MSc year, 2015/16). The issues with Learning Central will not be repeated.
4. The Module Organiser on the instrumentation module is aware of the issue and has tried to rectify it this year (2015/16 was the first delivery of this module).
5. The “easy option” modules may be those 3rd year courses that student are allowed to take (max. of 3 in the MSc year), or in the case of the “Innovation” module are simply developing and testing very different skill sets (i.e. not physics/maths based). A full review of the existing undergraduate astronomy/astrophysics modules and options is currently underway.
6. This has been taken on board and, wherever possible, students will be dealt with anonymously (and certainly at the Exam Board stage) in future. There are >20 MSc students in this new cohort, so it is sensible to try this now that the numbers are high enough to allow some degree of anonymity.

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 the support they have received from the School and of the material presented in the Programme.

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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