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

16 March 2020

Dear Professor Stevens,

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

I am writing further to the receipt of your report for .

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. BIT011 portfolios were richly annotated with clear allocation and justification of marks and constructive feedback.
3. Students greatly value this level of engagement, and they spoke positively about the effort expended by the module organisers and their ability to resolve problems.
4. For candidates due to undertake field work in Stage II robust plans were in place for scheduled updates and remote support.

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

1. **Module BIT002:**
  - a. *The team may wish to discuss whether the module covers the key areas and skills biosciences postgraduates need.*
  - b. *Consideration could be given to a series of sequential deadlines to ease the pressure on students.*



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- c. *The phasing of some taught components relative to assignments could be further optimised and there may be merit in starting aspects of the BIT002 module sooner to ease pressure.*

Prof Stevens has effectively summarised the issues with BIT002, some of which have been long-standing. For the current academic year we have tried to address the most pressing issues with the timing of deadlines, which have been more spaced out.

With respect to skills, the Board has agreed that broadening practical skills would be beneficial for students. To achieve this goal, we are considering to re-introduce a CRISPR/Cas9 practical, which used to run in the module. We have also initiated discussions with Heads of Research Hubs, specifically, Imaging and Single Cell Analysis, how to run meaningful demonstrations for small groups of students. These demonstrations would be linked to specific essays / coursework. More importantly, in light of all issues with the BIT002 module, the Board has decided to review it during the current semester with the aim of introducing the changes for 2020/21. New practicals, fewer and practical-linked assessments are at the heart of the changes that we will seek to implement.

2. ***Module BIT010 Data Handling in Statistics & Bioinformatics:*** *Some candidates felt that a high level of background knowledge of bioinformatics and computer skills was assumed of them, and provision of more online material, revision sessions and more demonstrators may be helpful.*

This issue was addressed in 2019/20 by providing an additional introduction session, online material and workshops. The early feedback has indicated that this action was successful.

3. ***Module BIT011 Key Skills in Research Practice:*** *The level of input from supervisors was somewhat inconsistent at this stage and the extent to which candidates had been proactive in identifying supervisors and refining project plans varied.*

As there is a large pool of potential supervisors each year, and equally each year's student cohort is unique, we are aware of the need to constantly monitor the key stages, starting from the project initiation, grant proposal development, through to project supervision and dissertation feedback. We try to provide timely guidance, to both students and supervisors. For example, in the current academic year, based on the Board decision, the course Director has informally talked to the colleagues that have not supervised a MRes project in our School before, offering advice and contact point of reference if a need arises.

4. **BIT018. Stem Cell Neurobiology:**
- a. *Attention to the timetabling of activities, and whether all BIT018 activities are necessary to achieve learning outcomes, will be needed to avoid unnecessary pressure on students.*
  - b. *All elements of BIT018 were double-marked, and while this represents good practice and identified some disparities between assessors, it is acknowledged to be time- and labour-intensive.*

The number of assessments has been reduced in 2019/20 to ease the pressure on students. Also in 2019/20 all elements of BIT018 were single-marked, as comparable BIT002 elements.

5. **The Assessment Process:** *Support for the notion of supervisors providing a mark for effort, but stress that this must be fully justified in writing.*

We fully agree with this comment. In cases where the mark is not justified, we will insist on a satisfactory justification.

6. **Noteworthy Practice and Enhancement:** *Students asked for improved communication, especially around timetabling and deadlines, and consideration of whether all assessed components of Stage 1 are necessary and appropriately weighted, given the intensity of the stage.*

The Board is aware that there is a need for constant monitoring of effectiveness of communication and improvements or adjustments when necessary. Timetables and the handbook are independently reviewed. The MRes team is fairly small and it has not changed in 3 years, which is helping to improve communication. With regard to the intensity of Stage 1, as discussed above (1), we are in process of redefining BIT002, which will result in fewer assessments. We will seek to proportionately adjust the assessment component of the BIT018 module as well.

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.

As this is your final year as External Examiner, we would like to thank you for your service and we are most grateful for your valuable input into this process.

Yours sincerely,



Mr Simon Wright  
Academic Registrar