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Sent by email to adam.benham@durham.ac.uk

23 October 2017

Dear Dr Benham,

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

I am writing further to the receipt of your External Examiner's Report for the BSc in Biochemistry, BSc in Genetics, BSc in Molecular Biology and the BSc in Biotechnology.

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. Consider whether a 2-week bioinformatics followed by 2-week laboratory project is appropriate at 3rd year for all the 4-year degree programme students that take this option.
2. Need for consistent provision of draft exam papers and model answers for consideration by the External Examiner.
3. Potential for enhanced transparency in documenting how disagreements in first and second marking/scrutineering are resolved.
4. Request for project reports to be provided in advance as pdfs, across the degree classification categories and degree streams.

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

1. This is comparable, albeit organised differently, to the amount of time non-masters students are expected to spend on their final year projects, which is 4 weeks full-time equivalent lab or literature searching time – in a block or distributed. These students will be going on to perform a considerably larger practical project in their Masters year.
2. This is acknowledged as a problem. The School has reorganised its procedures for production of exam papers within each module (an extra staff member for each module for whom it is their main responsibility) and anticipates this being much improved, and hopefully fully resolved, for the new Academic Year.
3. The School has a written procedure for dealing with marking disagreements in the scrutineering process, but agrees that this is not as clear as it could be and it is not always easy to track back and see what has happened. The School will look at its processes to improve this aspect of the scrutineering process.
4. The School agrees that this would be desirable, but there is a potential staffing resource issue. The School will explore how access to project reports in different subject areas etc. could be made available more easily and possibly in advance.

Additional comments / observations

The Student Information Management System

The School are currently being supported by their College Education Officer to discuss the challenges the School is experiencing with the suite of reports available to meet the requirements of their Examining Boards. The reports provide a broadly consistent approach across all Schools and limit the potential for error caused by separate School-produced reports. Any additional data requirements requested as part of the available reports will be discussed through this process.

Rounding

Your comments on University conventions on the rounding of marks have been noted and the School are currently being supported by their College Education Officer to allow the School to work within the current definitions of generic terms used in Senate Regulations. These provide the basis for rounding marks used to classify awards for all Schools within the University. 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 University is pleased to note your positive comments including:

1. your positive indications regarding the programme structure, academic standards and assessment process;
2. clear, comprehensive and student-friendly course materials;
3. progress made in the transition to 4-year degree programmes accompanied by a streamlining of themes to Biology, Biomedical Sciences, Biochemistry and Neurosciences;
4. the use being made of the full mark range;
5. impressive level of annotation and feedback provided by the School academics on final year exam scripts;

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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