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Sent by email to s.goodwin@sheffield.ac.uk

15 August 2017

Dear Professor Goodwin,

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

I am writing further to the receipt of your External Examiner's Report for the Astronomy & Astrophysics modules on undergraduate programmes in the School of Physics & Astronomy.

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. Marking at the appropriate level with some marking too generous;
2. Improvement to the internal review of exam papers;
3. Provision of model answers to the External Examiner;
4. Provision of module summaries by the module lead;
5. Correlation between coursework marks and examination marks;
6. The process of 'green penning' on scripts;
7. Clear and transparent marking and moderation processes;
8. Review of assessment load in all modules;
9. Availability of documentation from module organisers to show how they have responded to internal feedback;
10. Appropriate levels of feedback for students on their assessed work.

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

1. The use of whole or partial marks for “factual information” should be used with discretion by markers and used uniformly across any individual assessment. Marking clarity here is greatly enhanced by clear sub-division of marks (down to individual marks) in model solutions. Where descriptive answers are required (usually for several marks), the School will consider generic marking criteria along the lines of those developed for Project Reports (with clear identification of major and minor lapses).
2. The current procedures require papers to be submitted to the internal review panel in “finished form”, but this is not always the case, and School will ensure adherence to these procedures. Should any significant changes be recommended by vetting panels or made at a later stage these should go through a second vetting process before being released to the externals.
3. The School will consider adding these requirements to the procedures for the production of exam papers and model answers.
4. As part of our quality assurance, students complete questionnaires on each taught module. It is a requirement that Module Organisers respond to these questionnaires and also provide reflection on the teaching and learning generally on the module. These summaries are made available to students. Unfortunately, these are completed after the visit from our Externals, but we could make reports available from previous years. The University is also encouraging Schools to provide specific feedback on individual exams.
5. In keeping with University-wide initiatives, the School is currently reviewing its whole continuous assessment provision with a view to making significant changes for 2017-2018. The School is trying to take a “holistic view” across all our undergraduate degree programmes moving from simple, coordinated mathematical exercises in Year 1 to more in-depth probing of understanding of concepts in later years (including the use of “essay-style” questions).

The School introduced the use of plots of CA versus Exam marks for individual modules last year in our exam boards in an attempt to identify those modules where the CA seemed inappropriate (i.e. the “flat-liners”). Along with module averages and distribution of marks on each module, these are the most-discussed elements of our Exam Boards; these provide a good basis for bringing modules into some harmony without engaging in heavy-handed management. There has been a slight improvement since last year, but intervention may be required in some modules.

6. Our procedures for marking and checking exam scripts are clear but it seems they are not followed universally. The School management will stress the necessity to adhere to our stated procedures. A copy of our guidance to staff on examinations (setting and marking) is appended.

7. Our procedures for “Green Penning” requires a subset of scripts on each exam to be second marked (see the staff-guidance document). Second-marked scripts should be identified as such and should be clear to the external examiners. The School will continue to impress these requirements on staff.
8. The School is currently engaged in a complete review of CA and student workloads (with implementation in 2017-2018). We are aware of some particular issues with workloads associated with computing modules in Years 3 and 4.
9. Module Organisers are required to complete documentation to say how they have responded to comments from their Deputy Module Organiser, the Internal Exam Panel and the External Examiners. These should be made available to External Examiners for scrutiny and the School will emphasise the importance of this information to our External Examiners.
10. At the request of the External Examiners last year, we made examples of student work on CA in Year 3 and 4 available to the Externals. The review of CA includes a review of both assessment and feedback, with the aim of harmonising staff expectations of CA and setting minimum standards for the feedback provided to students including feedback on examinations.

The University is pleased to note your positive comments including:

1. Your positive indications regarding the programme structure, academic standards and assessment process;
2. Procedures are much improved on last year with support for the supervisor's mark in the lab diary and much more explicit assessment criteria;

I hope that you will find this response satisfactory and all School responses will be discussed in detail through the Annual Review and Enhancement process. 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