

INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE: EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORTS 2012-2013 – CARDIFF SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Dear Professor Condor, Professor Ettore, Dr May, Professor Powell, Dr Riley, Dr Uprichard, Dr Wincup and Professor Youdell (External Examiners for Undergraduate Programmes in the Cardiff School of Social Sciences – 2012-2013)

I am writing further to receipt of External Examiner's reports for undergraduate programmes of the Cardiff School of Social Sciences. All reports have been considered by the School in accordance with our approved procedures and the School has asked me to provide you with the following single response to the main issues raised.

"We are grateful to all of our external examiners for their constructive comments, and for their help throughout the assessment process.

We are pleased to note the many positive comments received from all our undergraduate external examiners. They unanimously endorse the standards set and the performance of the students. They are also very positive about the conduct of the exam boards and the work of the office in processing the assessment and examining process. Indeed two of the eight external examiners raised no concerns whatsoever.

Several of the external examiners raise issues that we shall wish to address. It is our annual practice to convene a post-exam board of studies meeting very shortly after the summer assessment period, and several of the issues raised here have already been fed back to the Board of Studies. All substantive issues discussed below will be referred to the Board of Studies. This response has been prepared by the Chair of the Examination Board and the Chair of the Board of Studies.

This is a composite response, based on all the externals' reports, rather than a series of individual responses. In this manner, all the external examiners can have access to each other's comments and the School's response. The following table summarises where external examiners have raised particular concerns under each of the following headings. This report then goes on to respond to any concerns raised under the relevant headings.

1	Programme Structure	All externals gave a positive response to this and there is no requirement for the school to respond to this formally.
2	Academic Standards	Wincup, Powell, May.
3	The Assessment Process	Wincup, Riley, Condor, Powell, May.
4	Year-On-Year Comments	Wincup
5	Preparation/Induction Activity (for new External Examiners only)	None
6	Noteworthy Practice and Enhancement	Uprichard
7	Appointment Overview (for retiring External Examiners only)	None
8	Annual Report Checklist	Wincup (8.8 and 8.16) - Powell (8.7 and 8.14) - May (8.8)

2. Academic Standards

Dr Wincup requests sight of the overall marks for each module, in addition to those for each item of assessment. We will in future provide a complete set of marks by

module including (a) the overall module mark and (b) marks for each assessment item.

Professor Powell made an additional comment about the absence of any descriptive statistics (e.g. means, medians and standard deviations) across modules that would aid him in establishing that academic standards existed across modules and not just within them. We will in future provide a module summary of marks to include (a) mean, (b) median, (c) standard deviation, and (d) frequency of marks by degree classification band. We would also hope that in providing and reviewing these summary statistics it should help determine whether Professor Powell's perception that "marking was a shade generous in places" and of potential for "some grade inflation at the margins" is valid or not.

Dr May highlights issues of consistency in respect to module outlines, quantity of written feedback, moderation practices and examination durations. First, we note that other externals have expressed confidence in our procedures for moderation. Nevertheless, we will continue to review our marking and moderation procedures and endeavour to ensure that consistent practice is followed across modules and between staff. These have been amended in the past year and perhaps some of these changes are yet to be fully enacted by staff. The undergraduate assessment procedures, including assessment feedback, were a key item on a recent Teaching and Learning Away Day during September 2013. The Board of Studies will also continue to review the structure and presentation of module outlines and handbooks for students to ensure consistency and readability.

Dr May also suggested that external examiners have secure access to Learning Central. The School will examine how we can make such secure access possible either in advance of examination board meetings or as part of the external examiners' visits to the School.

3. The Assessment Process

Dr Wincup asked that markers be encouraged to "offer more 'feed forward' to help students improve with other assignments". In addition, Professor Powell notes that "the volume of feedback was a little light in some cases". The School will continue to review and improve its feedback procedures and this was a key item on a recent Teaching and Learning Away Day during September 2013. Dr Wincup's remarks are helpful in identifying a way this can be improved.

Dr May, Dr Wincup and Professor Powell all raise concerns about the apparent occasional mismatch between final marks and feedback comments. For example, Dr Wincup notes she sometimes found it difficult to "to ascertain why a particular mark had been awarded for an examination script and related comments and suggestions". Professor Powell suggests "it should be made clearer whether this is 'second marking' or 'moderation'". And Dr May highlights "instances when the ticks on the feedback sheet...did not correspond with the final mark". We believe that many of these instances relate specifically to the use of a first and second marker who are using the same feedback sheet for students and/or moderation of the final mark. In future, markers will be required to agree their feedback to provide a composite response to students. Furthermore, only a moderated mark will be returned to students and that any moderation of marks will require the feedback to be amended accordingly.

Professor Condor makes some very useful points about moderation procedures, both across the University and within the School. We would like to think that our current moderation procedures already reflect some degree of nuanced view about how moderation should be undertaken. For example: items of assessment that involve several staff as first markers require additional team meetings to discuss the assessment criteria; assessment of the 40 credit dissertation module requires 'blind' first and second marking; assessment by new teaching staff requires second

marking as well as moderation. We therefore already seem to provide some of the more detailed approach to moderating that Professor Condor seeks. However, the Board of Studies will review this further to ensure our current moderation procedures are fit for purpose (see previous point).

Dr May and Professor Condor both raise concerns about the reluctance of markers to use the full range of marks, particularly towards the upper end of the scale. Guidance and support provided by the School to staff in their assessment practices will continue to stress these points.

Dr May raises a number of questions about the word length/count of primarily coursework assessments. The University is introducing new guidance for the use and penalties for coursework length that should address Dr May's concerns.

Professor Powell highlighted that there may be some inconsistency in the way in which instructions to students in examinations and coursework are provided. In the case of examinations we administer the collection and production of examination questions and instructions centrally, and attempt to provide some degree of consistency. And clearly in the case of typical coursework questions we can also attempt to provide a degree of greater consistency between modules. However, given we are attempting to diversify the ways we assess students and to encourage innovation in how they are assessed (in line with encouragement received from Dr Riley and Dr Wincup) we feel that some inconsistency in the way we instruct students to undertake their assessment is inevitable.

Professor Condor raises an issue about the involvement of dissertation supervisors in the assessment and marking of their student's dissertations. This has been discussed by the School previously, and the current practices arose due to concerns about the possible 'bias' (both negatively and positively) in supervisors assessing dissertations that they had a close involvement in. However, the Board of Studies will again revisit this point in light of recent experiences and concerns raised by Professor Condor and staff in the School.

4. Year-On-Year Comments

Dr Wincup notes concerns about the nature and timing of assessments sent to the external examiners in advance of the examination board meetings. We acknowledge that the criminology external does have to look at a relatively large number of assessment items and modules compared with our other external examiners. As a result we will consider whether we should begin to have two criminology external examiners to share this workload. In the meantime we will also consider sending assessment items electronically to external examiners, which may mean they receive them a couple of days earlier.

6. Noteworthy Practice and Enhancement

Dr Uprichard makes comments about having "access to more data about ALL the modules" and on the use of the full mark range in the first class mark range. The first point should be addressed in the provision of module summaries (see 2. above) and the latter has been addressed in point 3. above.

8. Annual Report Checklist

A number of points made by Dr Wincup and Professor Powell under this heading have been addressed above.

Dr May makes an additional point about the marking of examination scripts, which typically contain several responses or sub-items (e.g. several essay questions), and the way a final mark for the examination assessment is derived. Dr May explicitly asks how this process can be made transparent (particularly to External Examiners).

This has traditionally been problematic due to the use of categorical marking. However, the University is introducing new university-wide practices in the use of categorical marking, particularly in relation to whether this be applied at the individual sub-item (e.g. question) or at the assessment item (e.g. examination script). These new procedures will be reviewed by the School during 2013-14. If these new procedures do not appear to directly address Dr May's concern then we will undertake a supplementary review of the issue, although we note that this may continue to be constrained by the particular use of categorical marking we are encouraged to use by the University."

Positive Comments

The School and University are pleased to note the many positive comments of External Examiners on the School's provision including:

- a. **widely-shared, positive indications regarding the programme structure, academic standards and assessment process;**
- b. **Professor Ettorre's observations that "It is good to see that a wide range of grades are used in the assessment process" and positive thoughts on ongoing changes to University assessment regulations;**
- c. **Dr May's comment that the "one thing that really stood out...was the originality and quality of student work";**
- d. **Professor Powell's confirmation of "a variety of assessment methods, including a good balance between coursework and examinations";**
- e. **Dr Riley's identification of "links between theory and practice and critical reflection" as a "particular strength" of the provision and related observation of "a clear commitment to facilitating students' critical evaluation skills in the module structure and assessment" which was "part of an original, intellectual characteristic of the programme for which staff should be commended";**
- f. **Dr Uprichard's indication that "the form and content of the modules as a collective programme was first class and warrants much greater national and international attention and limelight";**
- g. **Professor Youdell's commendation of "the range of approaches to assessment" the "inclusion of criteria-specific grading and feedback on the marking sheets", induction activities and materials;**
- h. **the identification by several External Examiners of a range of noteworthy practices.**

I hope that you will find this response satisfactory and thank you for your service as External Examiner.

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 Registry web pages and will be available publically.

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.

Mrs Jill Bedford
Director of Registry and Academic Services