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Sent by email to g.j.holloway@reading.ac.uk

27 February 2017

Dear Dr Holloway,

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

I am writing further to the receipt of your External Examiner's Report for the BSc in Biology / Zoology / Ecology (Whole Organism Biology, Zoology and Ecology).

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. Challenges in getting students to use feedback effectively;
2. Your indication that some academics are unwilling to use the marking descriptors and of clear discrepancies between the feedback and the mark given.

The following response has been provided in consultation with the School:

1. The School notes your indication that the amount of feedback provided is on the whole very good. This highlights the School's continued concerns of a mismatch between student expectation of feedback and what is actually given.

The School will continue to inform students of the importance of feedback and how they get it (mostly from Grademark) and to manage their expectations. In

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fact only 30 % of students looked at their Grademark feedback in the 2015-6 Academic Year. The School has addressed this for the current Academic Year with increased training during induction week and further promotions during the year. The School is working with the University/Student Union feedback campaign in promoting engagement with feedback.

2. Reminders to Academics to use marking descriptors go out with marking tasks; further reminders will be sent as major marking tasks arrive. The School expects staff to use descriptors appropriate to a particular marking band [they don't need to write them all down – there is an overall cover phrase for each band], and then justify whether the mark was in the low, mid or high part of the band with a brief comment. This will be reinforced to staff.

Additional comments / observations

Your comments on University conventions on the rounding of marks have been noted. The Definition of Generic Terms Used in Senate Regulations provide the basis for rounding marks used to classify awards. 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 above definitions, approved by the Senate, establish the process for the calculation of module marks, the final mark used to classify the award and the year result. One of the reasons for adopting the above rounding conventions was to enable students to use module marks to calculate the final mark and the degree classification. If unrounded marks were used this would not be possible.

Your comments on University provisions for the condonement of failed modules by students with extenuating circumstances have been noted. The extenuating circumstances regulations allow for condonement in exceptional circumstances where the student is eligible for an award. Section 11.6.5 of the regulations state where an award or progression decision, the board is

permitted to condone in a module affected by extenuating circumstances, but the student should be permitted the choice to take the assessment or receive the award without further assessment.

Your comments on the discounting of entire modules when only one component has been affected by extenuating circumstances have also been noted. This is a University issue which recognises that students may have been disadvantaged by extenuating circumstances and is applied consistently across the University.

The University is pleased to note your positive comments including:

1. your positive indications regarding the programme structure, academic standards and assessment process
2. rigorous assessment process with very good amount of feedback provided to students;
3. your positive engagement with staff of the School, with material being made available very efficiently.

I hope that you will find this response satisfactory and we thank you for your continued support of the programme.

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.

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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