

[REDACTED]
Head of Education

Professor [REDACTED]
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[REDACTED]

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Dear [REDACTED]

External Examiners' Reports 2011/12

Thank you for your External Examiner's Report for 2011/12 and thanks also for your advice over the year which is much appreciated.

Our External Examiners have made a number of comments and, as usual, I provide here a common response to all Examiners. In addition, I am forwarding a copy to the incoming Physical Chemistry External Examiner ([REDACTED]) so that she is aware of the previous issues raised.

In advance of responding to your reports, it is probably useful to summarise some relevant decisions reached at a Chemistry Teaching Away Day on July 2nd:

1. A group will be set up to review our level of formal assessment (examinations), which is considered to be rather high, especially in Year 3.
2. Under (1), the possible elimination of students' attempts to question spot should be considered.
3. The guidelines for supervisor project marks will be reviewed, since I feel that a few of these may be slightly high; it should be emphasised, however, that moderation is a feature of our procedures.
4. A major review of the whole Chemistry course at Birmingham will be undertaken, once details are clear concerning the outcome of an overarching institutional review of teaching.

Specific issues raised in the External Examiner reports are considered below, in no specific order.

Project assessment and weighting

Comments related to:

- the credits related to the Year 4 project;
- the higher project mark compared with that for written examinations;

- the supervisor mark and moderation changing sometimes by only 1 or 2 %.

Our Year 4 format was changed a few years ago to ensure a genuine research component for this M-level part of our UG masters programme. This change was informed by QAA benchmark statements which stress that students should "undertake a research project the outcome of which is of a quality that is potentially publishable". Our belief is that the project must be a major feature of Year 4 and this was endorsed by our External Examiners at that time.

The situation described above therefore means that project assessment is vitally important. The system we use for moderation of project marks has been in place for many years and has been commended for its rigour. The marks for the supervisor and the two independent assessors are subject to scrutiny and moderation where appropriate. It should be remembered that the marks from the supervisor are not comparable with those from the other assessors since different skills are assessed, and therefore our allowed range for discrepancy is larger than that between the two other assessors. I believe our system where the supervisor does not assess the reports has real merit. However, I do believe that supervisor marks have possibly been subject to a small element of inflation, and the guidelines for this component are being reviewed (see preamble, item (3)).

We are very pleased that one examiner was totally complimentary about the procedures for project assessment and moderation.

BSc projects

One examiner felt that ideally all students should undertake an experimental project, and we agree with this. Indeed, we still offer students the choice of such a project, where numbers allow. However, I strongly believe that an experimental project should genuinely be research based, and with increasing student numbers, it is not possible to allow students an uncontrolled choice since we do not have space in research laboratories to accommodate all Year 3 BSc students. Indeed, it is considered that weaker students generally get little benefit from an experimental project over a literature based project. We now offer choice to students who achieve a mark in Year 2 that would have allowed them to enter the MSci programme, but elected to complete the BSc degree.

Exit route from MSci to BSc

One External commented again on the need for a satisfactory exit route from the MSci course to BSc, notwithstanding the institutional requirement for all graduating students to have completed a project. As indicated previously, we support this, but are having problems in finding a suitable way forward. Our previous plan to modify some of the Year 3 laboratory for MSci students to form a short 20 credit project is now not possible, since RSC has removed the "recognised course" status and has therefore accredited our BSc programme. This has a requirement of a 30 credit project, so we need to find a different solution if possible.

Students at classification boundaries

The University "profiling" system was again mentioned by one examiner in relation to potential perceived anomalies. Personally, I would be pleased to see a scheme that relied ONLY on the final weighted mark, but we need to conform with the regulations of the Institution.

Meeting with students

One examiner noted that students had "tactically" prioritised the Year 4 project and therefore obtained poorer results in the examination modules. This needs to be addressed and will be mentioned during the induction session this year for the next cohort of students.

It was also suggested by some students that some staff may not have appreciated the loss of "reading time" for the examinations this year. This is not true, and all relevant staff members were asked to confirm that the questions set would be appropriate for the current format.

One examiner suggested that students would appreciate more training in writing long reports. This is very much already recognised by staff, and will be incorporated in discussions concerning the major course review (item (4) in preamble).

It was suggested that CIE students (those who take a year in industry) felt that they received less benefit from the Year 4 project following their project in industry. Certainly we would expect that the more generic skills would have already been developed during the year out, which is recognised in the project design. However, we believe it to be important that all Masters students experience academic research by undertaking a major project at M level.

Marking Criteria

It was suggested that in one area of Chemistry, some model answers did not adequately indicate whether the material was lecture based, or related to an unseen problem. However, the School practice of requiring this was recognised as good practice. Staff will be reminded of this requirement next year.

Year 3 Laboratory Marks (MSci students)

It was noted that these marks were rather high, certainly in comparison with theory marks. This result is not, of course, uncommon and is particularly apparent for the MSci cohort, which consists of only our better students. In fact the average laboratory mark for this cohort is similar to equivalent marks they achieved in previous years.

Chemistry with a Year Abroad

We raised with our examiners the problem of reliably translating marks from overseas modules into UK equivalents. This was mentioned in one report. In fact we have already brought this to the attention of the Deputy PVC for Education, and it will be considered at institutional level.

In addition to those issues considered in detail above, a number of "good practice" points were provided, which are always a pleasure to note.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you would like more information on any of the above points.

With regards