

The University of Leeds

EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2012– 2013

Part A: General Information**Subject area and awards being examined**

Faculty / School of:	Biology
Subject(s):	
Programme(s) / Module(s):	Biology and Applied Biology
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	BSc and UG Masters

Completed report

The completed report should be attached to an e-mail and sent as soon as possible, and no later than six weeks after the relevant meeting of the Board of Examiners, to exexadmin@leeds.ac.uk.

Alternatively you can post your report to: **Head of Academic Quality and Standards**
Academic Quality and Standards Team
Room 12:81, EC Stoner Building
The University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT

Part B: Comments for the Institution on the Examination Process and Standards**Matters for Urgent Attention**

If there are any areas which you think require urgent attention before the programme is offered again please note them in this box

I think there are two urgent issues that require attention but they are related to processes not to the delivery of the programme – see section 3 of this report.

Only applicable in first year of appointment

Were you provided with copies of previous relevant External Examiners' reports and the response of the School to these?

Yes

For Examiners completing their term of appointment

Please comment on your experience of the programme(s) over the period of your appointment, remarking in particular on changes from year to year and the progressive development and enhancement of the learning and teaching provision, on standards achieved, on marking and assessment and the procedures of the School

N/A

1. Please indicate the extent to which the programme Aims and Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) were commensurate with the level of the award

- *The appropriateness of the Intended Learning Outcomes for the programme(s)/modules and of the structure and content of the programme(s);*
- *The extent to which standards are appropriate for the award or award element under consideration.*

Programme aims and intended learning outcomes are appropriate, as are the academic standards for the awards. Students have a large number of module choices – probably more than in many comparable institutions. With regard to programme structure, I feel that having 10 credit modules in the final year is likely to lead to an unnecessary heavy workload for final year students and to over-assessment – which is a common problem in UK HE. The assessment load in two 10 credit modules is likely to be greater than in one 20 credit module. There seem to be several ‘natural 10 credit partners’ that could be merged to form more coherent 20 credit modules, without reducing student choice markedly (whilst reducing teaching loads and freeing up time for research).

2. Did the Aims and ILOs meet the expectations of the national subject benchmark (where relevant)?

- *The comparability of the programme(s) with similar programme(s) at other institutions and against national benchmarks and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications.*

Yes, in line with subject benchmark statements and FHEQ.

3. Please comment on the assessment methods and the appropriateness of these to the ILOs

- *The design and structure of the assessment methods, and the arrangements for the marking of modules and the classification of awards;*
- *The quality of teaching, learning and assessment methods that may be indicated by student performance.*

I am not convinced that final year examination papers should contain short answer questions – they are difficult to assess in relation to essay-type questions e.g. can students show much evidence of wider reading in short answers? Further, the Faculty should consider whether there would be benefit in having a consistent structure across all final year papers (assuming that they all have the same credit value) with the same number of questions on each paper. The Faculty should also consider dividing the final year papers into two sections with ‘problem-type’ questions in one section, with students required to answer at least one question from each section. At the moment, most questions are ‘stereotypic’, inviting the regurgitation of lecture material.

It seems that any mark can be awarded for a piece of work from 0-100. There seems to be a general agreement across UK HE that it is not possible to mark to an accuracy of 1%. Many institutions now use a ‘stepped’ marking system i.e. 52, 55, 58, 62, 65, 68, in which the mark within any 10% range is determined by the extent to which a few (52), about half (55) or most (58) of the criteria for that range have been met. You may wish to consider such a system.

The marking criteria for different types of assessment (projects, examinations) are well constructed. It is therefore important that staff (i) use these criteria to allocate marks and (ii) to justify the mark awarded i.e. if wider reading is required for an examination answer to be awarded a mark of >70%, then when a mark of >70% is awarded, the mark justification should refer to wider reading. Following on from this, markers should identify in the margin of the examination booklet where the wider reading can be found (for the benefit of moderators and external examiners), as part of the system of script annotation (all correct and incorrect statements and wider reading clearly indicated). The same applies to the evidence for moderation – whatever the system, all staff should use the same system.

There are two interrelated issues that require urgent consideration ahead of next year – because if the suggestions made below are accepted, information on how degrees are classified should be included in student handbooks. I have concerns about the processes used to classify awards, although the systems in place provide a sound basis for further implementation. Essentially, I am strong advocate for having a completely objective system for classifying the awards of so-called ‘border zone’ students in the absence of mitigating circumstances i.e. degrees should be classified by a ‘profile’ of performance with no discussion (and therefore no discretion) of candidates. I would encourage the Faculty to confirm the process applied during the Examination Board i.e. if a border zone student with no mitigating circumstances has equal to or higher than 50% of credits in the higher class, then the higher class should be awarded (though you may wish to insert a requirement for there to be no failed credits for the award of a first). Under the current system, this criterion could be applied to years 2 and 3 weighted 1:1 or 1:2 or the final year alone (i.e. three opportunities to be elevated to the higher class). The key point is that there should be no other factors considered or any discussion. Under this system, it also means that students with the same mean marks will be awarded different degree classes if they have different ‘credit profiles’. Likewise, some students will ‘leap frog’ others with a higher mean mark, but without the required number of credits for the award of the higher class. These situations must be accepted without discussion i.e. it is the credit profile alone that determines degree classes. In some institutions, a single system of credit profiling is used across all Schools and all UG programmes, and this is to be encouraged (i.e. the objective and equitable treatment of all students across the institution).

If this process of credit profiling is adopted, it fundamentally changes the role of external examiners from the current situation – and for the better. In future, instead of looking at the work of borderline students, all work can be provided as modules. All modules can be allocated to the most appropriate external (and agreed in advance of the visit to Leeds). The role of the externals is then to look at student work across the full mark range for each assessment (projects, coursework, examination answers), to confirm the accuracy and consistency of marking standards. If the marks for the modules are approved, all degree classes are confirmed, including those of borderline students via the credit profile. Only those students with mitigating circumstances require individual discussion and this should be discussed as appropriate with the external examiners, and reported to the main Examination Board for approval.

A process for moderating a module with a mean mark that lies outside of an 'accepted range' (for modules, not for individual students) should be considered, if there is not already a system in place.

Finally, on assessment, the curious anomaly of '59' being a 2i for a degree class but not for a module needs to be resolved!

The quality of teaching and learning as indicated by student performance is good, including evidence of excellent achievement by some students.

4. Were students given adequate opportunity to demonstrate their achievement of the Aims and ILOs?

- *The academic standards demonstrated by the students and, where possible, their performance in relation to students on comparable courses;*
- *The strengths and weaknesses of the students as a cohort.*

The academic standards and achievements of students are in line with that in comparable institutions.

5. For Examiners responsible for programmes that include clinical practice components, please comment on the learning and assessment of practice components of the curriculum

N/A

6. Please comment on the nature and effectiveness of enhancements to the programme(s) and modules since the previous year

It would be particularly helpful if you could also identify areas of good practice which are worthy of wider dissemination.

As this is my first year, I am unable to comment in this area.

7. Please comment on the influence of research on the curriculum and learning and teaching

This may include examples of curriculum design informed by current research in the subject; practice informed by research; students undertaking research.

There is evidence for 'research-led' teaching across final year modules and in student projects.

For Examiners involved in mentoring arrangements

8. If you have acted as a mentor to a new External Examiner or have received mentor support please comment here on the arrangements

N/A

The Examination/Assessment Process

9. The University and its Schools provide guidance for External Examiners as to their roles, powers and responsibilities. Please indicate whether this material was sufficient for you to act effectively as an External Examiner.

- *Whether External Examiners have sufficient access to the material needed to make the required judgements and whether they are encouraged to request additional information.*

Yes in general, but there was limited access to module coursework.

10. Did you receive appropriate documentation relating to the programmes and/or parts of programmes for which you have responsibility, e.g. programme specifications or module handbooks, marking criteria?

- *The coherence of the policies and procedures relating to External Examiners and whether they match the explicit roles they are asked to perform.*

Yes, in general, all of this information was provided, either in advance of, or during the visit.

11. Were you provided with all draft examination papers/assessments? Was the nature and level of the questions appropriate? If not, were suitable arrangements made to consider your comments?

Yes, all draft papers were provided for comment. See earlier comments about short answer questions and the lack of diversity in final year questions on most papers.

12. Was sufficient assessed / examined work made available to enable you to have confidence in your evaluation of the standard of student work? Were the scripts clearly marked/annotated?

All examination scripts and final year projects were available, but not coursework. See earlier comments about the annotation of scripts.

13. Was the choice of subjects for dissertations appropriate? Was the method and standard of assessment appropriate?

Yes, a wide range of dissertation/project topics, with thorough assessment.

14. Were the administrative arrangements satisfactory for the whole process, including the operation of the Board of Examiners? Were you able to attend the meeting? Were you satisfied with the recommendations of the Board?

In general all processes were satisfactory. The Board of Examiners was conducted in a professional way. The recommendations of the Board were consistent and fair to all candidates.

15. Were appropriate procedures in place to give due consideration to mitigating circumstances and medical evidence?

Yes – thorough, consistent and fair

Other comments

Please use this box if you wish to make any further comments not covered elsewhere on the form

Please earlier comments in section 3 to be considered by the Faculty and University.

External Examiner:

Programme Area: **BSc Biology / BSc Applied Biology**

Academic Year: **2012/13**

Date of Response: **24th July 2013**

Dear

We would like to thank you for taking on the role of External Examiner, and for your generally positive comments on the programme content, structure and assessment.

Matters for urgent attention

The current Faculty guidelines for treatment of 'border zone' cases are non-prescriptive, suggesting areas to be considered rather than providing strict criteria for classifying borderlines. The External Examiner suggests that strict objective criteria should be implemented, using a profile of performance. At the Examiner's suggestion, these criteria were used in the classification meeting this year. We agree with the External Examiner that the current guidelines do not provide enough guidance to the exam board. These guidelines are decided at Faculty rather than School level, and these concerns have been highlighted to the Pro-Dean for Student Education. The Faculty is currently revising the guidelines for next year, to be included in the Code of Practice. Our understanding is that the revised guidelines will provide a set of objective criteria for classification of borderline students, with the expectation that these will be used for the vast majority of cases, but will preserve the ability of exam boards to use academic discretion if this is considered to be appropriate. These new criteria will answer most of the Examiner's concerns, and we expect there to be very few exceptions to the use of the new objective criteria in the School of Biology. We accept that some students may leapfrog others, and that this should not be used to argue against objective guidelines.

For the next academic year, we will adopt the External's suggestion of providing work organised by module rather than student, with different modules allocated to each External. Discussion of individual students will be limited to students with mitigating circumstances, or any exceptional cases where we feel the objective criteria should not be applied.

The curious anomaly of '59' results from University policy rather than Faculty or School guidelines. We will raise this matter with the Academic Quality and Standards Team. However, we note that this anomaly does not prevent borderline cases being classified using objective criteria, though makes it harder for a student to achieve the higher degree class.

Other matters for attention

Programme structure and assessment load for 10 credit modules: We currently have a mix of 10 and 20 credit modules in the final year. We note the External's comments that 10 credit modules may increase the assessment load for both students and staff. This is counterbalanced by the increased student choice provided by 10 credit modules. These issues will be discussed with the programme team.

Structure of final year examination papers: We note the External's concerns that our final year papers are over-reliant on lecture material, particularly where short answer questions are used. Though well-designed short answer questions can also allow students to show evidence of outside reading. We will discuss this further with the programme team, and highlight this issue to module managers, with the suggestion to increase the use of 'problem-based' questions where appropriate (this may not be the case for all modules).

0-100 scale: We have previously used a 'stepped' scale as the Examiner suggests. The current scale, which allows any mark, follows University policy. We agree that marking to an accuracy of 1% is not possible in most cases, but note that whichever scale is used is not likely to affect students' final marks.

Annotation of scripts and justification of mark: Our guidelines state that annotation should highlight outside reading and justify the mark given. Clearly there were some cases where these guidelines were not followed. We will reiterate to all markers the need for consistent annotation.

Moderation of module marks: The External recommends that a process for moderating a module with a mean mark that lies outside of an accepted range for the module. Our current system involves a statistical analysis of module marks ahead of the exam committee meetings. This analysis is passed on to the Faculty Director of Undergraduate Student Education, who considers whether there is a requirement for mark scaling in any modules with anomalous marks. This analysis is also presented to all programme staff, to help identifying any underlying reasons and allow these to be addressed in future years.

Provision of coursework: The Undergraduate Teaching Office currently takes a copy of a selection of each piece of marked coursework for each module, and in the majority of cases unmarked written coursework is available online on the VLE. We will provide the External Examiner with the copies of marked coursework in future years.

Yours sincerely,

Programme Leader