

The University of Leeds**EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT**

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2011– 2012

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

<i>Faculty / School of:</i>	Faculty of Biological Sciences
<i>Subject(s):</i>	Biochemistry
<i>Programme(s) / Module(s):</i>	Modules; BIOC 3111, BIOC 3221 and BIOC 3231
<i>Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):</i>	Bsc

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

None.

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?

N/A

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.*

I am only able to base my judgment upon the examination papers that I checked earlier in the year, the examination answers that I read, plus a quick read of the module material in June. From all that I have seen, the Biochemistry course is a very rigorous degree and I was impressed by the structure and content of the degree program: the academic standards are most assuredly commensurate for the award or award element under consideration.

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.*

Again, my opinion should be interpreted in the light of my relatively short experience with the aims and intended learning outcomes: my strong impression is that they compare highly favourably with those I have seen at other institutions and with national benchmarks for higher education qualifications: the Biochemistry degree at Leeds is one of the few that actually is a true biochemistry course (enzyme catalysis / regulation / kinetics / metabolic pathways etc. etc.), rather than molecular biology 'branded' as biochemistry (<<>>). However, I formed the impression that there is a substantial amount of molecular biology embedded within the biochemistry modules – but as an appropriate adjunct (e.g. cloning / expression) where molecular biological techniques are applied to biochemical studies.

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.*

Since procedures are uniform throughout the faculty, my comments on the Biological Sciences degree apply here:

The Biochemistry degree achieves a good balance between continual assessment (tending to be less discriminating between students) and examinations (typically more discriminatory). The spread of marks shows that the process does, indeed, effectively discriminate students across the range of abilities. Some discussion arose between the external examiners with regards 'second marking'. Virtually all institutions I have come across have adopted 'blind' second marking for all final year scripts. Blind in the sense that the first marker does annotate the scripts, but does not reveal the mark until the second marker has awarded a grade. A final grade then arises by agreement between the first and second markers. This system works upon the assumption that 2 members of staff are competent to mark the question: this is certainly not the case. I think that a system whereby second marking is only applied in cases of 'outliers' (where a student has notably under/over-performed in comparison with other marks), or, marks which affect border-line cases is a fair system. Such cases have been 'flagged-up' to external examiners and in these cases individual answers are effectively 'triple' marked. In my experience as an external examiner at Leeds I have not seen a student advantaged nor disadvantaged by the current system. To summarise, I find the system for module marking and the award of degrees is completely fair, transparent and is applied with care and diligence.

I strongly commend the system whereby the marks students within a given margin straddling a borderline are given special attention by external examiners, rather than operating on strict grades. The 'exit velocity' criterion by which students could be considered as a borderline case was considered by me, and the other external examiners, was an 'enlightened' policy and an aspect which influences my judgment of a student in a borderline situation. Undoubtedly 'anomalies' may arise with this consideration in place – students potentially 'leap-frogging' over others with a *somewhat* higher mark. I still believe, however, that if this is to go it would be a shame.

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.*

Due to circumstances, I cannot offer much here. From the standard of the examination questions I checked earlier in the academic year plus the answers to the Biochemistry papers I read in June, it struck me that Leeds had recruited a strong cohort of students – commensurate with the reputation Leeds has earned over many years for teaching Biochemistry.

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.

Again, since procedures and practices are pretty uniform throughout the Faculty, I reiterate my comments on the Biological Sciences degree:

One area of good practice is that performance in modules is determined using a range of methods of assessment: MCQs, continual assessment of course work, short-answer and essay-format questions in examinations. A second area of good practice is that methods of continual assessment develop a range of transferable (presentation) skills from students.

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.

From the Advanced Topics papers that I saw, it was quite evident that these modules included up-to-date research findings. As is the case with all comparable universities, Leeds has struck the necessary – appropriate - balance (resource / time allocation) between allowing students to perform either a laboratory-based or literature-based research projects. Both types of project are sharply focussed upon current research topics: care should be taken, however, in monitoring the 'effort' required from students for both types of project: literature-based projects should not become perceived as the 'easy option'.

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, any material requested was provided rapidly. Additional information for any module was volunteered. No problems were encountered in access to any material required to make assessments of the degree programme.

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, all material was provided.

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: the nature and level (academic rigour) of the questions were appropriate: in fact impressive.

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?

Yes, sufficient work was provided and any further material requested was provided rapidly. Interestingly, this year I was able to make comparisons between the Biological Sciences and Biochemistry modules: standards were uniformly high. The level of annotation in scripts could be improved: it would help if coloured ink was used to enable rapid differentiation between the students and the markers scrawls.

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

A super range of topics for dissertations: the methods and standards of assessment were excellent.

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?

Yes, the administrative arrangements were excellent, the whole process ran smoothly, I attended the meeting and was completely satisfied with all recommendations made by the Board.

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

Yes: the procedure is excellent. I was supplied with all the information needed to assess the impact of any mitigating circumstances - medical and otherwise.

Other comments

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



3 October 2012

Dear

EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT 2011/12: BSc Biochemistry

Many thanks for your agreement to act as external examiner for this programme at such short notice and for the positive comments regarding the rigorous nature of the degree, that its content is appropriate and learning outcomes achieved. I was especially pleased to read your commentary regarding module marking (and check marking) strategies, that you found the system used for the award of degrees fair and transparent and that the administrative support you received during your visits was excellent.

I note you comment that examination script annotation could be improved. We are continuing to refine the expectations of staff in this regard and hope to see continual improvements in the coming years, as this helps not only the external examiners but also the students to understand reasons for the mark awarded.

Thank you also for your positive comments on the range of assessments used, the quality of final year dissertation topics and that the programme contained opportunities for students to gain a good set of transferable skills.

I look forward to seeing you next year but in the meantime if you have any queries, please let me know.

Best wishes,

Faculty Director of Undergraduate Student Education

External Examiner:

Programme Area: **BSc Biochemistry**

Academic Year: **2011/12**

Date of Response: **12 September 2012**

Dear

Many thanks again for all your hard work on behalf of the Biochemistry programmes at Leeds as external examiner, particularly for stepping into the breach at such short notice to cover for our examiner who was unable to attend at the last minute.

Thank you also for your very positive comments throughout your external examiner's report for the year 2011-2012. We were extremely pleased by the performance of that cohort of students and with your recognition of our programme as providing a true biochemistry course (but with the correct balance of molecular biology built in).

Your report raises no concerns or points for action but I would like to comment on just two points which you mention in passing. The first concerns our assessment procedures. As you know, we have adopted a double marking system for all exam work that forms part of the degree classification. This double marking provides a check and balance for assessments to ensure fairness of marking throughout our sometimes large cohorts. I am pleased that you find the annotation of scripts useful as an external examiner, and I would like to echo your comments on the validity of 'blind' second marking only being relevant if two staff members are competent to mark the work. Our advanced topic units take the students to the cutting edge of research and I believe the method we adopt to double mark answers in these areas is perfectly suited to its function.

I also strongly echo your sentiments that candidates attaining marks close to boundaries should be considered by the external examiners rather than operating on strict grades. Unfortunately this is not something we as a programme have control over and like you I consider it a shame that the examining and assessment powers vested in local expert examination boards is being diminished.

Finally I would like to thank you for the very positive comments you make regarding the advanced topic modules and the choice and spread of topics available to students to take them to the limit in terms of research knowledge. I believe these truly reflect what research-led teaching should be about!

Many thanks for all your hard work for us and I look forward to seeing you again next year.

Best wishes,

Programme Leader for Biochemistry Programmes