

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>	Biological Sciences
<i>Programme(s) / Module(s):</i>	Modules: BIOL 3111, BIOL 3112, BIOL 3210, BIOL 3211
<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.*

The aims and intended learning outcomes are clearly stated for each module. Content of the models is complementary, but not overlapping, and provides students with excellent breadth across the biological sciences. This foundation enables students to make informed choices as to the areas they wish to focus upon in subsequent years. One advantage of 'scale' is that the choice for students at Leeds remains excellent throughout their degree program. The academic standards are uniformly high across the Biological Sciences modules and undoubtedly appropriate for the award elements.

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.*

The aims and intended learning outcomes compare highly favourably with those I have seen at other institutions and with national benchmarks for higher education qualifications: the Biological Sciences degree at Leeds remains a real strength.

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.*

The Biological Sciences 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.*

The (few) students I met with – but mainly the written work that I saw indicated to me to that Leeds recruits a strong cohort of students: courses are well-structured, challenging and well-received by the students. I did not see any data, but the university should examine if first-year drop-out rates was affected by electronic monitoring of student attendance of lectures. Last year I suggested that Leeds consider raising the asking grades for this course as another method of addressing this problem (and possibly shortening the 'tail' in final marks?): the experience at <<>> has been that raising the asking grades did not adversely affect applications – in fact, the reverse was the case.

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.

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.

It is readily apparent that although a broad curriculum is offered in years 1 and 2, the research interests of the academic staff impart a strong, individual, 'flavour' to the Leeds Biological Sciences degree: I saw plenty of evidence that final year modules had been updated and 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

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 scrawl and the markers scrawl.

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: this year students dossiers were provided in full – complete details as to any mitigating circumstances – and this greatly assisted in the assessment of any potential impact this may have had on the student's performance.

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 Biological Sciences

Many thanks for your efforts during the year and your constructive report on the programme and for your 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.

As has detailed in his response, we have over the last two years increased A level entry grades and are moving in almost all degree programmes towards a typical offer of AAB and as states, this has not had a detrimental effect on student applications in the last recruitment cycle.

I would like to echo comments in response and thank you once again for your comprehensive report. 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

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External Examiner:

Programme Area: **BSc Biological Sciences**

Academic Year: **2011/12**

Date of Response: **2 September 2012**

Dear

Thank you very much for your continued hard work and detailed interest in the Biological Sciences programme.

Thank you also for your report on academic year 2011-12 and the many positive points that you made about the Biological Sciences programme.

I was glad to read that you consider our assessment methods to be balanced, fair and giving students good opportunities to display their knowledge while being effective and discriminating. I was also pleased to read that you find our system of marking and second marking to be fair and applied with care and diligence. I also thank you for considering borderline students with care and attention.

You mentioned that we might consider increasing our requested entrance grades for this programme as a way of addressing "drop-out" of students in early years and a "tail" of students in Final year who, perhaps, under-achieve. We have increased our required A2-level grades for students entering in 2012 with no effect in number of applications or students who have accepted our offers. We will be increasing our grades again for entrance in academic year 2013 to AAB to ABB (with Biology and another science subject), therefore we are addressing this matter although it will obviously be some time before we can assess the impact on Finals results.

May I thank you again for all your hard work and excellent advice concerning the Biological Sciences programme.

Best wishes,

Programme Leader