

## 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:	Faculty of Biological Sciences
Subject(s):	Biological Sciences
Programme(s) / Module(s):	BIOL1212, BIOL2210, 2211, BIOL3111, BIOL3112, BIOL3210, BIOL3111
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	BSc

**Name and home Institution / affiliation of Examiner**

Title and Name of Examiner:	Professor Martin Ryan
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**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](mailto: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*

During my tenure as external examiner, there were substantial changes in both staff and to the BSc Biological Sciences degree program. During all of these changes academic standards have been at the very least maintained, or, in most cases, improved. The degree program has been re-organised and benefits from greater integration across the modules and the adoption of a broader range of methods of assessment.

## Standards

### 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 module aims and expected learning outcomes are clearly stated / set-out in all documentation supplied to students. Sufficient detail is provided to the students such that there should be no doubt as to the aims of the programme / modules in question, what is expected of the student and the intended learning outcomes. The academic standards are entirely appropriate for the award of a BSc in Biological Sciences.

### 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. The aims and ILOs all of the modules I looked at compared highly favourably with national benchmarks. The degree program content is first-rate. Excellent academic progression is achieved throughout the three years and module structures are both logical and complementary. The Leeds Biological Sciences degree program fulfils all the criteria laid out in the FHEQ descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 6.

### 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.*

Performance in modules is assessed using a variety of methods: from continual assessment of course work to MCQs, short-answer and essay-format questions in examinations. The methods of continual assessment involve a range of presentation (transferable) skills. Such methods are entirely appropriate to assess performance against the ILOs: a high standard is expected and attained.

### 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 students I met with, plus the written work I saw, all led me to believe that Leeds recruits a strong cohort of students: indeed, I believe that their performance compares well with students on comparable courses in other Institutions, and that performance has increased during my tenure as external examiner. All the evidence I saw showed me that the degree program was well-structured, challenging and, importantly, particularly well-received by the students with whom I met and discussed the course.

### 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.*

Areas of good practice shown by the BSc Biological Sciences program is (i) the broad range of methods used to assess students and (ii) specifically highlighting (in module booklets/handouts) those teaching /assessment components which address transferable skills and those which comprise formative feedback.

### 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 perfectly evident that modules are continually updated – particularly so for final year modules – such that the module content reflects the latest research findings. Work that I have seen from students undertaking research projects (both laboratory- and literature-based) shows that their work is informed by, and put into context with, current research.

## 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

In my first year I received mentor support from <>, which I found valuable: particularly <> familiarity with the procedures of assessment at Leeds.

**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.*

The material provided was indeed sufficient for me to comprehend the duties and responsibilities of an external examiner. Staff involved in the examination procedure were very helpful: I was encouraged to request additional information and when requested this was provided quickly.

**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 information was provided or access to electronic material made plain (module handbooks / examination papers & scripts / dissertations etc. All policies and procedures matched the roles I was asked to perform.

**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 drafts were sent in good time along with (in the large majority of cases) comprehensive model answers which enabled one to assess both the quality of the question posed and the nature / level of the expected answers – which, indeed, were entirely appropriate for the module content and the level being examined.

**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 - with one exception. Scripts / project write-ups were provided for those students falling within a degree classification borderline, or, that had mitigating circumstances - it would assist if scripts from students achieving flanking degree classifications (as-of-right) were also provided (as a matter of routine) to act as comparators. The one exception was that no work was provided for the practical skills module. I would recommend that in this case a 'module audit box' be created to house (a few) examples of good, bad and 'middling' work (from the range of assessment methods - where possible), so that the external examiners can assess the spread of the marks and the methods of assessment vis-à-vis providing sufficient discrimination between the performance of individual students.

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

Yes. Excellent subjects for the dissertations – absolutely first-rate projects offered to students (very interesting to read). The methods of assessment for the projects involves a number of different aspects to the write-up and performance in the laboratory. A comprehensive assessment system entirely appropriate for this type of work.

**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. When the performance of individual students was discussed, relevant members staff were present. The merits of students in classification borderlines / mitigating circumstances were discussed in depth at the board, and comparisons drawn between students in a particular borderline with those at the bottom/top of the flanking classifications. The decisions arrived-at by the Board of Examiners were entirely satisfactory. A thorough and completely fair process.

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

Yes. Great care, sensitivity and judgment was exercised and I felt that the effects (and any potential consequences for degree classifications) of circumstances leading to the consideration of mitigating circumstances were examined thoroughly - for all of the students.

Other comments

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

I have some reservation about the influence that the combined marks for the research project dissertation and practical skills module had on the final degree classification. In some cases students were achieving good (first-class) marks for exam questions but were 'dragged-down' by a lower mark for these modules, whilst in other cases students with low (or no) first-class marks in their exams were being 'dragged-up' by better performances in these two modules. I do, however, fully acknowledge that the project and practical skills modules are important modules. The spread of marks for the practical skills module appeared to be much lower than that for examination questions: it is a very common experience that continual assessment leads to a lower level of discrimination between students. These aspects should be monitored in the future.

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*External Examiner:*

*Programme Area:* **BSc Biological Sciences**

*Academic Year:* **2012/13**

*Date of Response:* **August 16, 2013**

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Dear

Thank you very much for your report on teaching and assessment in the Biological Sciences programme for academic year 2012-13. You have made many very positive points about our standards and assessment methods and you have also commented on the enthusiastic response from the students to our teaching and the programme in general.

You have raised matters concerning the availability of collated scripts of students who are not border-line, but flank the degree classification borders. We agree that it would be useful for the External Examiner to be able to use such students' work as a comparator for the border-line students whom you examine in depth and we will do this for the next round of External Examiner visits in 2014. You also requested a module audit box where examples of varying levels of work from the Skills module (BIOL3305) be placed for the External's use. We will also do this for the External Examiner visits in 2014.

You also raised the matter of the combined influence of marks obtained in the research project dissertation (BIOL3306) and the Skills module (BIOL3305) on the final degree classification. We agree with your observation that the spread of marks in the Skills module is much narrower than in lecture-based modules examined by unseen examination papers. We have appointed a new Module Manager of BIOL3305 and one of major objectives is to increase the discrimination of candidates in this module – our initial aim is to introduce more quantitative exercises which we hope will result in a greater spread of marks. We will be monitoring both of these modules in the future.

This is, of course, your final report on the Biological Sciences programme. On behalf of the Programme Team, I would like to thank you most sincerely for your hard work, constructive advice and help throughout your tenure as External Examiner.

Best wishes,

Programme Leader