

The University of Leeds

EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2011– 2012

Part A: General Information

Subject area and awards being examined

Faculty / School of:	Biological Sciences
Subject(s):	<i>Microbiology</i>
Programme(s) / Module(s):	Microbiology; Microbiology with Virology; Microbiology with Immunology; Medical Microbiology; Microbiology in relation to medicine.
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	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

1. Formal feedback mechanisms required for year 3 assessed work with firm deadlines for both students and staff.
2. Course has become narrow and confined mostly to Virology and Immunology – the curriculum needs to be looked at to define whether it truly delivers a Microbiology Honours course. My concern here is reflected by the fact that of ca. 22 questions posed in the three Advanced Topics papers, three (building blood vessels; Molecular Oncology and allergy) were not appropriate to a Microbiology degree course.
3. The Microbiology Today paper was cancelled during the year – much to students' dissatisfaction. The consequences also meant that the content of the continuously assessed module MICR 3325 was much reduced and this to my mind was unsatisfactory as both an assessment component for year three and for student perception.
4. There were no formal assessments in the inter-semester period – students felt therefore that they had no yardstick during the year to measure their progress and which areas of study they needed to address. This should be addressed for next year.
5. This year students were assessed on a project mark, a continuously assessed module and a total of 9 written examination answers. Any poor performance in any one of the latter 9 exam answers had a significant effect on the final mark – consider moving to 4 answers from 8 in the advanced topics papers next year to broaden the modes of assessment .
6. As I stated in my report last year, all year 3 exam papers should be double marked – not a selection of answers as happens currently. Leeds is out of step with most other Universities I am familiar with in this respect. The second marker should mark a question independently from the first marker – thereafter the two should meet to agree the final mark. This is a process that ensures fairness to **all** students.
7. On a positive note I note that after my comments last year that year 1 and 2 marks seemed to be on the low side – this year's performance at year 1 and 2 was excellent with more students obtaining marks at the higher end of the scale and which I think more reflect the high quality of the student intake at Leeds.

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?

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

I have seen the Microbiology curriculum become narrower in each successive year I have been external examiner so that this year it looks threadbare. This is due largely to retiring staff not being replaced so that their areas of microbiological expertise have been lost. The current staff do a valiant job in keeping the show on the road but further retirements in the next two years and the loss of the programme leader <<>> this summer means that the University needs to urgently address the format and possibly staffing of Microbiology for next year and beyond.

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 standard of scholarship required of the students was commensurate with a BSc level course.

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.*

See my comments in part B.

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.*

See comments in Part B

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 quality of the students was very good and this was particularly true of the intercalating medical students who performed especially well with most gaining a first class degree.

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

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.

The programme has diminished compared with last year.

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.

Biological research at Leeds is strong and this was reflected in the quality of the projects which I read. It is clear that students taking laboratory based projects do so in well resourced groups and are given excellent support and guidance.

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

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.*

Excellent support and all necessary materials made available.

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.*

All information and documents provided in good time – administration procedures excellent.

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

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

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

Yes

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

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

Yes

Other comments

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

I would like to thank all the staff concerned with student examinations at Leeds for their professionalism and for their hospitable and collegiate engagement with the examination process.



17 October 2012

Dear

EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT 2011/12: BSc Microbiology

Many thanks for your thorough report on the quality of the programme and the issues faced. has responded at length so I will now reiterate elements here suffice to say that it is not the first time that changes adopted in programme design secondary to student feedback can induce conflict in other parts of the programme which can be difficult to resolve. In report has suggested some changes which may help students to gauge the quality of their performance during semester 1 level 3.

I also share your and concerns regarding the narrowing of the curriculum and agree with that consolidating the suite of MICR programmes may be a sensible approach. There is also the slight possibility of engaging some clinical colleagues in future which might help to bolster microbiology content but these discussions have yet to take place.

I note your repeated call for full double marking of all level 3 examination scripts. has responded to this point in his letter to you, effectively reiterating our position as of last year. To give some more information, we have reviewed our processes for next year to include check marking of a minimum of 10 or 10% of scripts plus all failed scripts and if there are significant differences (>5%) between first and check marker which cannot be resolved, then a third marker is brought in and all scripts remarked. We feel that this is a rigorous approach which will capture issues where marking differs significantly between first and check marker and provide a mechanism for its resolution.

It is challenging environment at present for the microbiology suite of programmes given the recent staff losses but we shall endeavour to support these programmes in the future which as states, may involve some form of rationalisation of programmes offered or identifying additional resources that can enhance the microbiology content. On a more positive note, thank you for all your efforts and input to the programme over the last three years, this is valued greatly.

Yours sincerely,

Faculty Director of Undergraduate Student Education

Enc

External Examiner:

Programme Area: **BSc Microbiology**

Academic Year: **2011/12**

Date of Response: **11 July 2012**

As Program Leader and representing the staff involved in Microbiology teaching I would like to thank again in your role as external examiner, producing a thorough report and working with us. Below we address the areas highlighted for urgent action:

- (1) *Formal feedback mechanisms required for year 3 assessed work with firm deadlines for both students and staff.*

I note that Level 3 January exams (which would have provided some feedback on progress) were moved to the summer exam session in response to (1) student feedback over all three IMCB programs to allow them more time to focus on the project and (2) a faculty wide initiative to rationalise the examination processes. There are firm deadlines in place for both students and staff, these are clearly stated in the module manual and both staff and students will be aware of them. With regard to staff deadlines (e.g. lateness of providing feedback) or quality of feedback (e.g. inadequate feedback), this is a management issue and I recommend that appropriate individuals should be identified and action taken.

- (2) *The course has become narrow and confined mostly to Virology and Immunology – the curriculum needs to be looked at to define whether it truly delivers a Microbiology Honours course. My concern here is reflected by the fact that of ca. 22 questions posed in the three Advanced Topics papers, three (building blood vessels; Molecular Oncology and allergy) were not appropriate to a Microbiology degree course.*

We appreciate your concerns in this area and at the request of [redacted] has conducted an overview of the Microbiology Programme looking at the provision of bacteriology teaching. In general there is a good balance of bacteriology, to virology to immunology at the three levels. The degree is organised around research strengths and when it was reorganised the philosophy was that it is taught to the strengths. We note, that at other Institutions have the opposite problem e.g. at Newcastle there is little virology and mostly bacteriology. I do feel that currently the four microbiology degrees could rationalise into three, with the dropping of the general microbiology degree. This has been discussed with other members of the microbiology programme, who are in agreement.

The module managers for the level 3 Advanced Topics modules ([redacted] and [redacted]) are addressing ATU issues, also in the light of the departure of [redacted] and [redacted]. They are investigating the possibility of adding additional ATUs in bacteriology and they plan to discontinue ATUs in *building blood vessels and allergy*.

- (3) *The Microbiology Today paper was cancelled during the year – much to students' dissatisfaction. The consequences also meant that the content of the continuously assessed module MICR 3325 was much reduced and this to my mind was unsatisfactory as both an assessment component for year three and for student perception.*

I agree with this statement, the decision to drop the paper was made unilaterally above program level. I hope it will be reinstated for the 2012/2013 session as all microbiology staff felt it was a good discriminator between students of different abilities. Again I note that the first semester at Level 3 was kept deliberately free of assessed work in response to previous student feedback requesting time to focus on their third year dissertation/project.

- (4) *There were no formal assessments in the inter-semester period – students felt therefore that they had no yardstick during the year to measure their progress and which areas of study they needed to address. This should be addressed for next year.*

In response to earlier visits by [redacted] highlighting the need for students to know their progress, it may be possible to move some elements of the assessed course work taken in the Microbiology Level 3

skills module into the first semester rather than semester 2, as is currently done. In addition the performance mark for the project could be released earlier than currently, to enable students to better gauge their progress on the project module.

- (5) *This year students were assessed on a project mark, a continuously assessed module and a total of 9 written examination answers. Any poor performance in any one of the latter 9 exam answers had a significant effect on the final mark – consider moving to 4 answers from 8 in the advanced topics papers next year to broaden the modes of assessment.*

The module adopted will be still be three questions out of 5/6 topics. Any change in the number of questions would have to be done at Faculty level, as ATUs are taken by many different cohorts of students. We also have to balance staff workload. I note that 60 credits of the third year is continuously assessed and therefore we feel students have ample opportunities to demonstrate and obtain good marks.

- (6) *As I stated in my report last year, all year 3 exam papers should be double marked – not a selection of answers as happens currently. Leeds is out of step with most other Universities I am familiar with in this respect. The second marker should mark a question independently from the first marker – there after the two should meet to agree the final mark. This is a process that ensures fairness to all students.*

Again, this will have to be decided at Faculty level as the modules taught under the Microbiology umbrella cross different degree boundaries (e.g. across Institutes). I believe that because of workload implications and the highly specialised nature of many questions staff would not be receptive to the proposal of Prof. Edwards.

- (7) *On a positive note I note that after my comments last year that year 1 and 2 marks seemed to be on the low side – this year's performance at year 1 and 2 was excellent with more students obtaining marks at the higher end of the scale and which I think more reflect the high quality of the student intake at Leeds'.*

I am pleased with this and note that the robust changes in skills at Levels 1 and 2 and their integration with core curricula as well as an improving cohort of students may account for this.

Programme Leader