

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:	Biological Sciences
Subject(s):	Neuroscience
Programme(s) / Module(s):	
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	B.Sc

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?

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

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 ILOs for the neuroscience programme and aims are stated clearly for each year of the BSc Neuroscience and BSc Neuroscience in Relation to Medicine course on Campusweb. The ILOs are entirely commensurate with each level and there is a clear progression from one year to the next.

The standards are entirely appropriate for a course of this type.

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.*

I have experience of similar courses at the universities of <> and <>. The standards are equivalent and easily meet national benchmarks.

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.*

A range of assessment methods are used which test a variety of skills and knowledge. In final year, 40 credits are devoted to a research project which is a major component of the course and is assessed according to a research report and lab performance (for lab projects) or a grant proposal (for dry projects).

The quality of teaching is very high; this is reflected in the excellent results obtained this and in previous years I have examined. Assessment is rigorous and fair.

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.*

Again, as was also the case last year, the standard achieved was exceptional; approximately 30% of students were awarded first class honours and very few obtained less than upper second class honours. The number of students obtaining first and upper second class degrees is higher than usual and also higher than that of equivalent institutions, however my overall impression was that this was an outstanding cohort of students.

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.

I am not aware of any substantial changes to the course since last year. I had the privilege of meeting a group of 2nd and 3rd year students in March. This was a very informative meeting and is an example of good practice. Now that few Universities hold vivas, it is often the case that external examiners do not have any direct contact with the students being examined. I have copied a summary of this meeting in 'other comments' below.

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.

In neuroscience it is essential that senior students are taught by active researchers. This is a great strength of the course at Leeds. Some universities are introducing a dichotomy between teaching and research; in my view this is a serious error that produces courses that are not up to speed with contemporary findings. It also ensures that students undertaking research projects get the best possible research training.

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

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.*

I was provided with full documentation for all courses and had free access to all marked material. I was able to peruse individual marks the day before the final board of examiners meeting.

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

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 papers were appropriate for 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. I was able to peruse a selection of scripts and dissertations during both my visits. All scripts examined were annotated and comments by internal markers were very helpful for understanding why a particular grade was awarded. In a few cases, no comments appeared on dissertation marksheets. Although examiners often highlighted the descriptors in boxes, I think it would have been helpful to have received a few sentences explaining why particular mark was given. This is especially important for students who fall within discretionary bands between degree classes.

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

A good range of topics were offered. For lab projects the method of assessment was not only based on the dissertation but also on lab performance and an oral presentation. A mock grant application is an excellent form of assessment for those taking 'dry' projects. This type of assessment enables students to acquire a number of generic skills in addition to reviewing the literature and provides an insight into how science 'works'.

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?

The administrative arrangements were excellent. I was able to attend the meeting and was satisfied with the process and decisions made. I had to adjudicate on one borderline candidate where there was an anomaly in the project report. It would have been useful to have further information about this from the supervisor.

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

No students fell into this category this year.

Other comments

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

Meeting with Neuroscience students 5/3/13

3rd year:

The student I spoke to was generally very happy with the course. <> particularly enjoyed the Integrative Biomedical Skills option which taught important *in vivo* skills. <> also commented on the breadth of the course as a particular strength. Apparently some students found the Advanced Topics modules rather 'challenging' as they had to cover a large amount of background material and a considerable range of topics. It was unclear to me if this was a strength or a weakness but I pointed out that 3rd year should be challenging. The 3rd year rep also felt <> project was a very valuable experience and has applied for a PhD scholarship.

2nd year:

These students thought that the Experimental Skills and Topics in Neuroscience modules provided a very good basis for the neuroscience course. There was some overlap of material in the Neuropharmacology option and some of the other modules. The students enjoyed the neuroanatomy classes but felt that the learning experience could be improved if they had more time to study specimens. They liked the mixture of compulsory and optional courses but, for some students, this could lead to an intensive period of assessment as several options were assessed at similar time points during the academic year. The students would also like a formal mechanism to write practice essays; they found the transformation from MCQ assessments to essay assessments difficult, and would like more feedback on essay writing skills.

External Examiner:

Programme Area: **BSc Neuroscience**

Academic Year: **2012/13**

Date of Response: **09/07/2013**

Dear

Thank you so much for your support and dedication in acting as our external examiner for neuroscience. I would also like to thank you for the detailed and positive report that you provided so promptly. I would just like to consider some the points raised in this report.

It is very gratifying to hear that you regard the quality of teaching so highly; I certainly value all the hard work and enthusiasm of the staff associated with the neuroscience programme. We appreciate your recognition of the strong influence of our research on teaching; as you are aware, the University of Leeds considers that translation of excellence in research and scholarship into learning opportunities for students is a key strategic aim in producing excellent graduates. I will ensure that we maintain our efforts to keep teaching contemporary and research driven.

The grades obtained by these students were excellent, which is also a reflection of the high quality of the students applying for this course. You are indeed correct in your postulation that these students were an outstanding cohort and it was a pleasure to teach them since their focus, level of engagement and insightful comments made for very rewarding scientific interactions.

We are pleased that you find the student meeting a useful exercise; thank you for taking time to provide feedback from this meeting. It is important to maintain a sense of reality with respect to the expectations of our level 3 students but we do appreciate that you took time to explain to the 3rd year student the importance of challenging students at this level, especially considering background research papers. It is good to hear that the Topics and Experimental skills modules were popular but I will look into the overlap between Neuropharmacology and other modules. This module has a new module manager and I will liaise with them and the pharmacology programme leader to consider how to address this issue. With the neuroanatomy classes, there had already been an increase in time spent in the dissecting rooms in response to previous feedback from students; however, I will determine whether access to the specimens could be further extended. The students requested a more formal arrangement for practice essay writing and more feedback. This is a skill that is first introduced at level 1 when all students have an essay writing tutorial in their personal tutorial groups. This entails an hour discussing the important factors in producing a good essay then focusing on one relevant subject for the essay, with discussion of what is appropriate to include and the structure. The essay is then written and there is detailed feedback provide by all tutors on this. At the beginning of level 2, there are formative essay writing exercises in BMSC2117 and BMSC2118 with generic feedback and peer marking. However I have had further discussion with some level 2 students regarding these issues which was fruitful and I will aim to introduce a further timed essay at either level 1 or level 2.

I am gratified that all scripts were annotated appropriately for justification of marks awarded, however, I share your concern that some of the dissertation mark sheets did not provide any additional comments regarding award of mark. I will ensure that for all dissertations, the importance of providing these comments is once more emphasised to all markers, regardless of whether they are first or second markers. This was a particular concern for the student in the discretionary band and I will also ask that all supervisors are either present at the exam board meeting or available for comment on such a case in future. The grant report that is a component of the literature projects at level 3 does seem to be an excellent way of enabling those students not directly involved in laboratory work to be aware of the meticulous process in the generation of income for research. We

are aware of the importance of preparing our students for employment and are pleased that you consider that preparing these applications promotes attainment of generic skills.

In conclusion, I would like to thank you once again for your thoughtful and beneficial input to our neuroscience degree programme and the assessment of our students. We really value your insight and I look forward to implementing some of your recommendations as we strive to maintain the high standards of our degree programme.

With warmest regards

Programme Leader for Neuroscience