

# 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:	Faculty of Biological Sciences
Subject(s):	Zoology & Environmental Biology
Programme(s) / Module(s):	Zoology BSc Zoology (Int) BSc Zoology (Ind) BSc Ecology and Environmental Biology BSc Ecology and Environmental Biology (Int) BSc Ecology and Environmental Biology (Ind) BSc
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](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*

There are no matters that require attention that would preclude the programme being offered again.

#### 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?*

Yes, I was provided with both the report and the response of the school.

#### 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 for both programmes are appropriate both in relation to structure and content of the course as a whole, and of individual modules.
  - The standards are entirely appropriate with the levels of awards made in all programmes.

**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 programmes are comparable with similar programmes in other universities with which I am familiar, including my own and others that I either have taught at or served as external examiner.
  - Teaching is of consistently high quality and includes a significant practical component, including field work. It includes a good level of generic and transferrable skills, including quantitative analysis that enhance the student's career prospects.

**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 design and structure of the assessment methods are entirely appropriate. There is a good mix of assessment methods and I understand and agree that some of the variation relates to the aims, learning outcomes and structure of the individual modules.
  - Some modules are assessed entirely by coursework and others entirely by a closed book examination, although the former are in a minority. Notwithstanding the bullet point above, consideration needs to be given to the appropriateness of either an entirely exam- or coursework assignment-based assessment of final year modules as both methods of assessment test different knowledge and skills. In addition, an assignment component provides valuable feedback as to individual student performance prior to the examination.
  - I was able to comment on examination questions, and was given adequate time to do so. The length and breadth of questions were appropriate, including the challenging and wide-ranging paper that tests the student's knowledge of statistics in year one.
  - The type of questions re the close-book examinations is appropriate, with one or more essay-length answers required by final year students to test their depth of knowledge and understanding.
  - Annotation of examination scripts is variable. It is important that the comments provide justification for the mark awarded as an aid to the moderator, and to assist the external examiner in assessing the appropriateness of the individual and overall marking. It should also be made clear which scripts were moderated by the moderator initialling the agreed mark and, where appropriate, adding a comment(s) on the script.
  - I was not able to comment on written assignments. Although I realise that such a request in future will necessitate (some) students returning their marked work I feel that it is important for the external examiner to be able to comment on the appropriateness of the assignment, quality of feedback and standard of marking. Clearly I would only wish to see a selection reflecting the range of marks for the module in question.
  - Consideration needs to be given to ensuring parity of student time between modules attracting the same number of credits. Some assignments appear to require more work on the part of the student than others and it is important that student effort is similar and commensurate with the number of credits
  - The standard of the projects and the resulting dissertation were entirely appropriate, and I commend the broad range of areas studied. Likewise the method of assessment was detailed and rigorous.
  - I commend the detailed breakdown of marks (including means and variance) which facilitated inter-module comparisons.
  - There remains a large variation in mean, variance and distribution between degree class of marks between modules. Modules assessed entirely by coursework invariably resulted in an overall higher mark and, often, lower variance than those assessed by coursework and/or closed book examination. Consideration needs to be given to addressing this disparity to ensure that students do not select modules of basis that some are perceived as 'easy'.
  - The system of mark provision via spreadsheets works very well and I commend the efforts of the academic and administrative staff to ensure that marks (including from other schools and faculties) were available for consideration by the examination board.
  - The arrangements for the classification of awards were very good, with each student given due and appropriate consideration. I was given the opportunity to comment on the borderline students on the basis of examination and project performance. The provision of the pro-forma is an excellent approach as ensures consistency between students.
  - The quality of teaching, learning and assessment methods are very good as indicated by student performance statistics, with an appropriate distribution of grades. As stated above, the standard of assessment is appropriate, both in terms of student performance, but also from available hard copy documentation and on-line material - and commensurate with other Russell Group universities.

**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 academic standards demonstrated by the students are comparable than programmes in other similar institutions.
- I has the opportunity to talk to students from all three years of the programme in March (which I commend as good practice) and they were articulate and very positive regarding their programmes
- Students were provided with an opportunity to demonstrate their performance on basis of examinations, projects and assignments although I could only take a view of the former two methods of assessment. On this basis the best performing students were excellent and commensurate with similar programmes elsewhere

**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.*

- Difficult to comment on changes as this is my first year as external examiner
- Good practice:
  - Opportunity to talk to students from the three cohorts in March, i.e. before they are focussing on examinations. I would encourage staff to encourage more students to attend these sessions.
  - Good grounding in statistics and transferable skills
  - Good quantification of mean and variance of marks within and between modules
  - Full provision of marks and other information before and at the examination board.

**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 unit content and examination questions, some of the modules, particularly in the final year, are informed by current research. Provision of assignments would allow an assessment as to whether this applies to this method of assessment also.
- Projects often relate to current research of supervisor(s).

**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.*

- Material was generally sufficient. I had access to examination papers, outline answers where available, examination scripts and projects (including assessments).
- Staff were helpful in providing additional material such as student marks.
- I would in future like a view of a selection of assignments from each module, including question(s) asked and some indication of data sources available to the students in relation to completing the assignment.

**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 available, including in advance of the examination board.
- My responsibilities were clear, including a helpful resume upon my arrival for the examination board.

**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, I was able to comment on draft examination papers. In some cases there were no outline answers re essay questions and I would request these be provided in future
- The nature and level of questions were appropriate to the cohort and commensurate with similar programmes elsewhere in the UK.

**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, in relation to closed-book examinations and projects
- Examination scripts and projects were clearly marked
- Justification of individual/agreed mark for projects is clear
- As stated above, annotation of examination scripts is variable. It was not always clear which scripts were examined by the moderator.

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

- Yes, the choice of subjects for the dissertations were appropriate, and informed by staff research interests in many cases.
- Both the method and standard of assessment were entirely appropriate.
- Comments justifying the individual supervisor, moderated and agreed mark were clear.

**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 prior to and during the board (which I attended) were entirely satisfactory
- The performance of each student was given due and appropriate consideration, and I was able to take a view regarding borderline candidates
- I was entirely happy with the recommendations of the board.

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

- Yes. There was initially slight confusion regarding my role but it was clarified that recommendations regarding mitigating circumstances is entirely the responsibility of the internal mitigating circumstances committee, and that their decision is simply reported to the board and marks etc adjusted accordingly.

Other comments

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

This is my first year as external examiner for the above programmes and I am grateful to all of the academic and administrative staff for the provision of information, and helping to make my visits to Leeds a pleasant and informative (and I trust effective) experience. Likewise thanks to those students who took the time to meet me and my fellow examiners in the spring. I look forward to further input into what are excellent programmes.

External Examiner:

Programme Area: **BSc Zoology; BSc Ecology**

Academic Year: **2011/12**

Date of Response: **31 August 2012**

Dear

Thank you for your thorough review of the Zoology and Ecology and Environmental Biology degree programmes. We are certainly pleased that there are no urgent matters of concern with the two programmes. Your support of the high standards we hope to deliver is much appreciated. The areas of concern that you raise will undoubtedly help us to improve our programmes and we shall pay particular attention to the following points that you raised:

**Comment 1:** *“Some modules are assessed entirely by coursework and others entirely by a closed book examination, although the former are in a minority. Consideration needs to be given to the appropriateness of either an entirely exam- or coursework assignment-based assessment of final year modules as both methods of assessment test different knowledge and skills. In addition, an assignment component provides valuable feedback as to individual student performance prior to the examination.”*

**Response:** The programmes teams will look at the different methods of assessment and we may need to account for how marks potentially differ significantly between coursework and exam assessments. To some extent the methods of assessment are aligned with the particular mode of teaching (exam when purely a lecture-based module, solely coursework (typically a variety of assessments methods) when teaching in a seminar/small-group based from several staff). Modules that are exam-based always have a method of providing self-assessment and/or formative feedback during the teaching period so that the students do have an opportunity to test their level of understanding. We offer a wide choice of modules and all students doing zoology or ecology have an opportunity to be assessed by both examination and coursework.

**Comment 2:** *“Annotation of examination script is variable. It is important that the comments provide justification for the mark awarded as an aid to the moderator, and to assist the external examiner in assessing the appropriateness of the individual and overall marking. It should also be made clear which scripts were moderated by the moderator initialling the agreed mark and, where appropriate, adding a comment(s) on the script.”*

**Response:** We will certainly endeavour to be more clear and consistent with exam script annotation and ask staff to more strictly adhere to existing marking guidelines, which are routinely supplied with the exam scripts.

**Comment 3:** *“I was not able to comment on written assignments. Although I realise that such a request in future will necessitate (some) students returning their marked work I feel that it is important for the external examiner to be able to comment on the appropriateness of the assignment, quality of feedback and standard of marking. Clearly I would only wish to see a selection reflecting the range of marks for the module in question.”*

**Response:** This has been noted and we hope that these kinds of assignments can be supplied in the future. Such assignments are typically submitted and marked electronically so it should be possible to provide the material in a timely fashion.

**Comment 4:** *“Consideration needs to be given to ensuring parity of student time between modules attracting the same number of credits. Some assignments appear to require more work on the part of the student than others and it is important that student effort is similar and commensurate with the number of credits.”*

**Response:** The programme teams will examine the relative workloads between modules and endeavour to ensure that students consistently work approximately 100 hours for 10 credits as per the guidelines. The disparity may arise from the differences in contact versus self-learning periods.

**Comment 5:** *“There remains a large variation in mean, variance and distribution between degree class of marks between modules. Modules assessed entirely by coursework in variably resulted in an overall higher*

*mark and, often, lower variance than those assessed by coursework and/or closed book examination. Consideration needs to be given to addressing this disparity to ensure that students do not select modules of basis that some are perceived as 'easy'."*

**Response:** The large variation in mean, variance and distribution between marks continues to occupy staff across the whole of the Biology programme, but we are working to reduce this variance. For example, different mark moderation/adjustment models have been considered. As per point 1, the programmes teams will examine the causes of any significant disparity between marks awarded for solely coursework or exam assessments. Our feeling is that students do not think that the coursework modules are easy; rather they do not like exams.

Best wishes,

Programme Leader Zoology

Programme Leader Ecology and Environmental Biology



3 October 2012

Dear

**EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT 2011/12: BSc Zoology and BSc Ecology**

Many thanks for agreeing to act as external examiner for this programme and for your constructive report on the programme. I am pleased that you feel that the teaching on the programme is of high quality, that the programme includes transferable skills which enhance the student's career prospects, that learning outcomes are met and that a good mix of assessment strategies are utilized; all core aspects of a well designed degree programme.

Regarding your comments on check marking and annotation of decisions where an agreed mark is recorded, and we have identified strategies to help alleviate your concerns in future. To address issues associated with variation on mean module marks, we have recently drafted a new procedure, to be implemented in all programmes, where mark adjustment can be applied by exam boards where there is a strong academic case for this to occur. The process allows for both increases and decreases in module or module element marks so that the outcome appropriately reflects the academic capability of the students. All examination officers have been briefed on how and when such a process is to be used which should help mitigate for the module mark variation which you have observed.

Further to your comment about the variability in the level of annotation of examination scripts, this is an issue which we have been targeting over the last year and will continue to improve. We have redrafted the expectations of primary and check markers and given module managers the responsibility to make sure that annotation is carried out. Another important point you raise concerns the disparity in workload across different modules with the same credit weighting. This is an important issue and we need to do some work to harmonise this, which will be taking forward.

I'm glad you found the administrative arrangement commendable and the operation of the examination boards assured a consistency of approach for all students. Thanks once again for agreeing to act as external examiner for this programme and I look forward to meeting you again next April.

With best wishes,

Faculty Director of Undergraduate Student Education

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