

## The University of Leeds

## EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2012– 2013

**Part A: General Information****Subject area and awards being examined**

|                                      |  |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| <i>Faculty / School of:</i>          | Faculty of Biological Sciences   |
| <i>Subject(s):</i>                   | Zoology & Environmental Biology  |
| <i>Programme(s) / Module(s):</i>     | Zoology BSc<br>Zoology (Int) BSc<br>Zoology (Ind) BSc<br>Ecology and Environmental Biology BSc<br>Ecology and Environmental Biology (Int) BSc<br>Ecology and Environmental Biology (Ind) BSc |
| <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](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 the response of the School to my 2011-2012 report.

***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

**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 aims and intended learning outcomes for all programmes continue to be 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 (The University of \_\_\_\_\_ and others that I either have taught at or served as external examiner or validation officer.
  - Teaching is of consistently high quality and includes a significant practical component, including residential field courses. Teaching includes a good level of generic and transferrable skills, including quantitative analysis that enhances 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 continues to be 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. The students commended the quality of provision.
  - 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 less variable this year, which is to be commended. It was also clearer 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 will necessitate (some) students returning their marked work if not submitted and assessed electronically 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. Therefore to form a better view as to the appropriateness of assessment it would be advantageous in future to have a selection of collated written work for each modules, including assignments
  - The standard of the projects and the resulting dissertation were entirely appropriate, and I commend the broad range of areas studied by students. Likewise the method of assessment was detailed and rigorous. I commend the inclusion of a poster, and that assessment of this component includes student's response to questions. Some staff supervise large numbers of projects (up to eight) which represents a large work-load and may result in variable supervision. Consideration need to be given to a more equitable distribution of projects although I appreciate that some research areas may be more popular with students than others.
  - Assuming the expertise is available; projects could include education projects for students considering a career in teaching. Here students develop a resource (often on-line) than can be used to enhance the learning experience of secondary level students for example. Other projects can include a resource developed (and tested on) students taking specific units as part of the project student's course at Leeds.
  - I commend the detailed breakdown of marks (including means and variance) which facilitated inter-module comparisons. I was pleased that there was less variation than in 2011-2012 in the mean, variance and distribution with a mean of 56%-64% in 2012-2013 (the single exception falls within the remit of my fellow external examiner and is being addressed in collaboration with the relevant staff).
  - In common with many institutions, including my own, there is reluctance in some cases to use the full range of marks at the top end of the scale. Although this is has not resulted in students being disadvantaged in terms of a 1<sup>st</sup> Class award it does mean that very good students do not perhaps receive full recognition. This is particularly important in that, increasingly, candidates are including transcripts of marks in applications for employment and/or further training.
  - 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) were available to the examination board. However I would request provision of marks on an A3 sheet upon arrival. I am aware that it may not be complete at this stage but will facilitate focus on borderline students regarding unit-specific and overall performance.
  - 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 within the compensation boundaries 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 had the opportunity to talk to students from all three years of the programme in April (which I commend as good practice) and they were articulate and very positive regarding their programmes. All stated they would recommend their programmes to prospective students.
- 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.*

- Good practice:
  - Opportunity to again to talk to students from the three cohorts in April, i.e. before they are focussing on examinations. I was however again disappointed that more students did not take the opportunity to attend – no final year Environmental Biology students for example. In particular the student representatives should be strongly encouraged to attend – perhaps could be a prerequisite to assuming that role.
  - Poster presentation that forms part of assessment of final year project: both good practice and commended by the students.
  - Students are able to solicit feedback on their performance in the examinations although it is suggested that more time is provided and that a larger room(s) are made available as some students were unable to obtain full feedback to due time and/or space constraints.

**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

## 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.*

- Material was generally sufficient. I had access to examination papers, outline answers where available, examination scripts and projects (including assessment).
- Staff were again very helpful in providing additional material such as breakdown on student marks upon request.
- 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. Although a few assignments were provided on a memory stick I would have liked a larger selection of assignments – both question(s) and answers.

**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 majority of cases there were outline answers re essay questions but I would request these be provided in all cases.
- 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
- Annotation of examination scripts remains variable although it was clear which scripts were examined by the moderator on basis of moderator's initials against the mark.

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

- Yes, the choice of subject for the dissertations was appropriate, and informed by staff research interests in many cases.
- Both the method and standard of assessment were entirely appropriate, with clear justification for the mark awarded.
- 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 once again able to take a view regarding borderline candidates and was provided with examples of examination scripts and projects of all such candidates
- I was again 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 but I would request more clarity regarding the role of the external examiner in relation to the mitigating circumstances/discretionary board and request this be provided in advance or upon my arrival next year.

## Other comments

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

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 experience. Likewise thanks to those students who took the time to meet me and my fellow examiners in the spring and I look forward to meeting more cohorts in the future.

External Examiner:

Programme Area: **BSc Zoology / BSc Ecology**

Academic Year: **2012/13**

Date of Response: **28 August 2013**

Dear

Thank you once again for your thorough review of the Zoology and Ecology and Environmental Biology degree programmes and we are very pleased to learn that there are no urgent matters of concern. Your continued support of the high standards we strive to deliver is much appreciated. We hope that the changes we made to the programmes following your report last year have led to further improvements and we will endeavour to do so again. We shall pay particular attention to the following points that you raised:

1. *"I was not able to comment on written assignments. Although I realise that such a request will necessitate (some) students returning their marked work if not submitted and assessed electronically 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. Therefore, to form a better view as to the appropriateness of assessment, it would be advantageous in future to have a selection of collated written work for each modules, including assignments."*

You are right to point out that, whilst we provide many opportunities for students to be assessed by in-course written assignments, we do not currently determine whether the assignments, their marking and feedback are appropriate. We will liaise with the undergraduate teaching office to ensure that we can provide you with a selection of written assignments that reflect a range of marks. We also recognise that this is indeed a comment that you made last year and we will make certain that a mechanism is in place to provide you with the assignments in future.

2. *"The standard of the projects and the resulting dissertation were entirely appropriate, and I commend the broad range of areas studied by students. Likewise the method of assessment was detailed and rigorous. I commend the inclusion of a poster, and that assessment of this component includes student's response to questions. Some staff supervise large numbers of projects (up to eight) which represents a large workload and may result in variable supervision. Consideration needs to be given to a more equitable distribution of projects although I appreciate that some research areas may be more popular with students than others."*

We are very grateful for your support of the wide range of project topics that we offer. You are correct that some staff appear to have a large number of undergraduate projects. However, we are keen that the students are able to undertake one of their listed project choices. The load may also be offset by balancing 40 credit projects with 20 credit projects), especially those with popular areas of research, but in fact we do endeavour to balance individual project loads by taking into consideration masters level project supervision as well. A high undergraduate load reflects a light masters load.

3. *"Assuming the expertise is available; projects could include education projects for students considering a career in teaching. Here students develop a resource (often on-line) that can be used to enhance the learning experience of secondary level students for example. Other projects can include a resource developed (and tested on) students taking specific units as part of the project student's course at Leeds."*

This is a very interesting idea and we will look within our programme teams to see who may have the appropriate expertise and interest in offering such projects. We will also consult with colleagues from other schools in FBS where there are good examples of such projects.

Best wishes,

Programme Leader Zoology

Programme Leader Ecology and Environmental Biology