

The University of Leeds

EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2013-2014

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

Name and home Institution / affiliation of Examiner

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

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 2012-2013 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

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 level 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 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. Semester 5 units are more challenging as is appropriate at Masters level.

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. Useful and informative unit outlines are available to the students.
 - 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 years one and two.
 - 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, plus short answer questions to test the student in other subject areas encompassed by the unit. Sometimes however the short answer questions seem to require a longer time to adequately address the question than is available – and often this is confirmed by the outline answer which requires a significant amount of information, and often in essay form. I feel that the answer should reflect the time available, and that this should be made clear to the students. For a two hour paper with one essay and four short answers this also need to be made clear in the rubric - e.g.

SECTION A. Answer **ONE** questions from this section. Spend about one hour on this section which attracts 50% of the final mark.

1. Essay Q 1
2. Essay Q 2
3. etc

SECTION B. Write notes on EACH* of the following. It is suggested that you spend no longer than about fifteen minutes on *each* note. This section in total attracts 50% of the final mark.

1. Short answer Q1
2. Short answer Q 2
3. etc

(*or FOUR if choice)

- I would question the logic of the different length of the examinations between units. Usually year three units are of 2 hours duration but occasionally 1.5 hrs. I feel that 2 hours is required to adequately test the student's knowledge and understanding at this level.
- Annotation of examination scripts is generally good but occasionally not as informative in relation to justification for the final mark as I would like. It is also suggested that the summary statement justifying mark should make more reference to the marking criteria. An exemplar was BLGY324301 Advanced Topics in Zoology which made reference to the marking scheme and also an indication of supplementary reading in the margin (one criteria first class mark).
- Moderation appears to be universal which is to be commended and now clear which scripts were moderated by the moderator initialling the agreed mark and, where appropriate, adding a comment(s) on the script.
- I was pleased that I am now able to comment on written assignments. The assignments are appropriate in relation to the level of assessment and are varied in relation to content and output. I commend assessments that require the students to write a grant proposal as intellectually challenging and require a good knowledge and understanding of the literature. Occasionally numerical assignments could have included a little more interpretation in addition to data presentation and statistical or other analysis. I note that in some cases there is a specific marking scheme in relation to assignments. I assume students are aware of these and hence the different criteria. In some cases more reference could have been made to the marking criteria to assist students in evaluating their performance in the 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 one again detailed and rigorous with reason for

change when markers disagree by more than 10%. I commend the inclusion of a poster, and that assessment of this component includes student's response to questions. The 80 credit BLY5380 MBiol Research Project is appropriate to this level and time

- I am pleased that education projects are available to students that may be considering a career in teaching. The resource (often on-line) developed was then used to enhance the learning experience of secondary level students. Other projects included 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 although would have liked means and variance to facilitate inter-module comparisons. However there seemed to be little variation between units with all lying within the expected range.
- 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.
- The arrangements for the classification of awards were very good, with each student given due and appropriate consideration. The final classification of borderline candidates is based on a rubric relating to the relative number of units achieving the higher classification which I commend. I do not feel that a viva is an appropriate way of differentiating students and am pleased that this is not used in the Faculty of Biological Sciences
- 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 academic standards demonstrated by the students are comparable than programmes in other similar institutions.
- I and the external examiners of the other programmes had the opportunity to talk to students from all three years of their programmes in April and the students were articulate and very positive regarding their programmes. All stated they would recommend their programme to prospective students.
- Students were provided with an opportunity to demonstrate their performance on basis of examinations, projects and assignments and I could only take a view of all 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:
 - Range of assignments that test student's knowledge and skills in data manipulation and analysis, knowledge and understanding of the literature (including knowledge gaps through writing a 'virtual' research grant proposal) and oral presentation skills
 - Students able to obtain feedback on their performance in the examinations.

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, assignments and examination questions, some of the modules, particularly in the final year, are informed by current research.
- Projects often relate to current research of supervisor(s).

8. Where the programme forms part of an Integrated PhD, please comment on the appropriateness of the programme as training for a PhD

N/A

For Examiners involved in mentoring arrangements

9. If you have acted as a mentor to a new External Examiner or have received mentor support please comment here on the arrangements

No

10. 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 entirely sufficient. I had access to examination papers, outline answers where available, examination scripts, assignments and projects (including assessment).
- I was pleased that this year I was provided with examples of assignments but would in future like this to include question(s) asked and some indication of data sources available to the students in relation to completing the assignment. Otherwise it is difficult to assess student performance in relation to what was required by the lecturer.
- Staff were once again very helpful in providing additional material upon request.

11. 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 changes arising from the new regulations relating to borderline candidates.

12. 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 relation to outline answers re essay questions.
- The nature and level of questions were appropriate to the cohorts and commensurate with similar programmes elsewhere in the UK.

13. 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 all methods of assessment
- Assignments, examination scripts and projects were clearly marked
- Justification of individual/agreed mark for projects is very clear and transparent
- Annotation of examination scripts remains variable and it is suggested that more reference is made to the marking criteria to aid the moderator and external examiner.
- It was clear which scripts were examined by the moderator on basis of moderator's initials against the mark.

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

- Yes, once again the choice of subject for the dissertations was appropriate, and informed by staff research/teaching 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.

15. 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.
- I was again entirely happy with the recommendations of the board.

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

- Yes and I am also entirely happy that the external examiner is not now involved in mitigating circumstances/discretionary board.

Other comments

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

I am once again grateful to all of the academic and administrative staff for the provision of both before and after my arrival at Leeds of all required information, and helping to make my visits a pleasant and informative experience. Likewise thanks to those students (more this year) 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.

Faculty of Biological Sciences
Student Education Service

Student Education Office
Irene Manton Building
University of Leeds
Leeds
LS2 9JT, UK



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

30 September 2014

Dear

RESPONSE TO EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT 2013/14
BSc Zoology – all variants
BSc Zoology in Relation to Medicine and Veterinary Science
BSc Ecology and Environmental Biology – all variants
MBiol, BSc Zoology (Integrated Masters) – all variants
MBiol, BSc Ecology and Environmental Biology (Integrated Masters) – all variants

Thank you once again for your thorough review of the Zoology and Ecology and Environmental Biology degree programmes. We are very pleased to learn that there are no urgent matters of concern and that you continue to support the high standards we strive to deliver. As we look to make further improvements, we pay particular attention to the following points that you raised in your report:

1. *“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, plus short answer questions to test the student in other subject areas encompassed by the unit. Sometimes however the short answer questions seem to require a longer time to adequately address the question than is available – and often this is confirmed by the outline answer which requires a significant amount of information, and often in essay form. I feel that the answer should reflect the time available, and that this should be made clear to the students. For a two hour paper with one essay and four short answers this also need to be made clear in the rubric”*

We think that the mix of essay and short answers, although variable between module and dependent upon the structure and material in the module, is correct and we are glad that you support us in this. We also find that students tend to spend too long/provide too much information for the short answers and we welcome the suggestion to clarify what we would expect to see in the rubric.

2. *“I would question the logic of the different length of the examinations between units. Usually year three units are of 2 hours duration but occasionally 1.5 hrs. I feel that 2 hours is required to adequately test the student’s knowledge and understanding at this level.”*

Since the last round of examinations the School of Biology has agreed to standardise the length of exams (in particular Level 3) for 10 and 20 modules (1.5 and 3 hours respectively). We feel that with appropriate questions (a mix of essays and short answers that may vary between modules according to the kind of material taught) these exam lengths should be sufficient to adequately test the students’ knowledge and understanding.

3. *“Annotation of examination scripts is generally good but occasionally not as informative in relation to justification for the final mark as I would like. It is also suggested that the summary statement justifying mark should make more reference to the marking criteria.”*

We will impress upon staff that they need to fully justify the mark given and in particular make full use of the marking criteria. Hopefully this is largely common practice now.

Yours sincerely,