

The University of Leeds
EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT
ACADEMIC YEAR: 2013-2014

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

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|-------------------------------|---|
| Faculty / School of: | Biological Sciences |
| Subject(s): | Biology, Ecology |
| Programme(s) / Module(s): | 3105, 3171, 3246, 3271, 3021, 3340, 3398, 3399, 5380M |
| Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc): | BSc, MBiol |

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 Quality Assurance**
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

I would recommend a review of the structure of final year examinations (credit value, duration of examinations, numbers of questions to be answered, and level of question choice). I appreciate that it may not be possible to introduce comprehensive changes for session 2014-15, but a set of principles could be established rapidly. Details are provided later in the report.

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?

N/A

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 ILOs and overall standards are commensurate with the degree awards.

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.*

Yes, Aims and ILOS are aligned with national benchmarks and FHEQs

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 structure of assessments with a combination of coursework elements and end of module examination maps on to common practice for degrees in Biosciences. In general, student performance gives confidence to the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, though I am of the view that the structure of some final year examinations may not allow students to demonstrate their full potential. Details are given later in the report.

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.*

Academic standards are consistent with comparable institutions. Work of excellent quality was evident in some students and there were no obvious cohort-wide weaknesses. In some final year examinations there was little evidence of first class/outstanding quality but I feel that this is largely attributable to format of the examination (see end of report for details)

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 received a full response to the comments expressed last year but I am unable to comment on specific enhancements (that is not to say that these have not occurred). I was concerned last year about an apparent lack of clarity around the process for determining degree classifications, though an effective process emerged during the Board of Examiners meeting. I hope that this system has been rigorously applied this year i.e. no subjective discussion of so-called 'borderline' students. Because of an unexpected admission to hospital, I was unable to travel to Leeds this year.

The report forms used for the assessment of student projects are comprehensive as is the quality of marking and second marking of these assessments.

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.

A number of coursework assessments and examination questions reflected the research interests of staff, and as such, the impact of research in informing the undergraduate curriculum was evident.

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

N/A

The Examination/Assessment Process

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.

Yes - sufficient

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

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 – all draft papers were sent to me. In general, examination questions were set at an appropriate level (but see later comments on the duration/structure of some papers.

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 – I was provided with an extensive sample of projects and scripts. There were two general problems noted with script annotation: (i) a number of the ‘end of script’ summary comments were unhelpfully short and not related to the marking criteria, and (ii) the identification of wider/supplementary reading to justify the mark and aid the second marker, was very patchy, and there were several examples of marks >70% where no wider reading had been ‘annotated’ or referred to in the end of script comments.

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

Yes – I was impressed by the range of dissertation/project topics and the method and standard of assessment.

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?

I had an unforeseen admission to hospital in the week of the Board of Examiners. The other administrative arrangements worked well, including the delivery of a large sample of student work for me to review.

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

For reasons above, I cannot comment for session 2013-14.

Other comments

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

The comments below provide detail to statements made elsewhere in this report.

Taught modules: 3105, 3171, 3246, 3271

For the most part I thought that the marking was fair and consistent. I will make a wider point below about the mix of 10 and 20 credit modules, and the variable number of questions on different examination papers, but there are some specific comments to make here on taught modules that may stem, at least in part, from the duration of an examination for final year 10 credit modules (1.5 or 2 hours).

I think there is room to improve with comments made on scripts to justify the mark awarded, and for these comments to link directly to the marking criteria. For example, for a mark of >70% I would expect an answer to include evidence of wider/supplementary reading, and for this to be identified by the first marker to aid the second marker. There was one script in 3171 awarded 76% but no wider reading was flagged up in the margin, or in the comments at end. This begs the question of whether in an 'essay' answer, a student can be awarded a mark of >70% without any evidence of wider reading?

3105 (Applied Animal Science) is a 10 credit module that has a 2 hour examination in which students answer 3 questions from a choice of 6. Allowing for preparation time, is 30-40 minutes sufficient time for students to demonstrate honours level skills? And allowing for the fact that in the opinion of the question setter that one question 'was not appropriate for supplementary reading' (which I am not sure I agree with), the absence of any comment on wider reading in all of the other scripts/questions that I was sent was worrying – even to point of staff not commenting that there was no wider reading and that was one of the reasons for the mark awarded.

3246 (Evolution and Population Genetics) is a 10 credit module with a 1.5 hour examination and students answer 3 questions from a choice of 8. Why do two 10 credit modules have examinations of different duration and different levels of question choice - is this an accident of history? This does not make sense. Further, in this module, some end of script mark justification comments were unhelpfully short (e.g. 'Very good answer'), that made no cross reference to the marking criteria. There were also scripts awarded marks of >70% with no indication of any supplementary reading. I think that the structure of this paper is not suitable for a final year examination. Students must answer 1 question from section A with a suggested time allowance of 45 minutes, and 2 questions from section B in the other 45 minutes. Allowing for time to plan an answer, for section A questions, students will have around 40 minutes to write (presumably) an in depth answer, with synthesis, critical analysis, supported by relevant wider reading – I am not sure this can be done! Indeed, I was sent a large sample of scripts for this module, and across all the answers to section A questions I found only 2 scripts awarded a mark of >70% - and one of those answers was awarded a mark of 74% with no indication of wider reading.

I will mention 3271 (Animal Metabolism and Nutrition) to point out that again, there were answers awarded a mark of >70% with no indication from the marker of any wider reading.

Project modules 3021, 3340, 3398, 3399, 5380M

I looked at all of the projects sent to me. I am content that the marking is fair and consistent. The second marking is thorough and the mark justification/feedback sheets well structured. I have no concerns in this area of assessment.

Recommendations

There needs to be greater consistency (and quality control) in the mark justification on scripts in two respects. The end of script summary statement should be linked explicitly to the marking criteria; secondly, if wider reading is a requirement for marks of >70%, this should be highlighted in the margin and included in the summary comment – including the absence of any wider reading as an explanation as to why a higher mark was not awarded.

I think there needs to be a review of the structure of examinations, as part of a wider review of the overall assessment load in modules. In the meeting with students earlier this year, many commented that the workload varied considerably in modules with the same credit value. There seemed to be some acknowledgement of this problem in the feedback meeting with staff. The first question to be addressed (in two parts) is (i) is the observation of students correct, and (ii) if yes, how should this be addressed. Experience suggests that 'encouragement to standardise' rarely works (there are always reasons why a particular module is an exception), so the answer is to implement a universal model: e.g. all taught modules that have a coursework and examination assessment will have the same ratio for these two elements (e.g. 33:67) within a year of study, and a fixed number of coursework assessments (only one in a 10 credit module). This model can usually be applied in final year modules, and with common sense, to modules in other years (e.g. where marks from practicals are combined) – with rare and well-justified exceptions allowed.

I would recommend that you also reflect on the comments above and consider whether there is a place for 10 credit modules in the final year of a Biosciences degree – and if you decide yes – then at least you standardise on (i) the duration of the examination, (ii) the level of question choice, and (iii) the number of questions to be answered in the time allowed. If you retain 10 credit final year modules, my recommendation would be a 2 hour examination in which students answer 2 questions from a choice of 4 (sectioned appropriately).

However, experience indicates that the assessment load in two 10 credit modules is invariably greater than in one 20 credit module. I feel that you are over-assessing your students, with an inappropriate structure in some final year examinations and in so doing,

students are prevented from showing the depth of their knowledge and wider skills, and in effect, limiting the number of 'good honours degrees'. For what it is worth, in my own School, we have no 10 credit modules in any year of study (all taught modules are 20 credits), a fixed ratio for coursework : examination in all modules (and a fixed number of coursework assessments), a standard format for all examinations within a year of study, and final year students answer 2 questions in 3 hours from a choice of 4. Within this system there is wide scope for flexibility in the style of both coursework assessments and examination questions, but the overall load on students is the same irrespective of the modules they study.

**Faculty of Biological Sciences
Student Education Service**

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UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

17 November 2014

Dear

**RESPONSE TO EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT 2013/14
BSc Applied Biology; MBiol, BSc Applied Biology (Integrated Masters)
BSc Biology; MBiol, BSc Biology (Integrated Masters)**

Thank you for once again taking on the role of External Examiner for our programmes. We appreciate your generally positive comments on the programme content, structure and assessment. We have discussed the matters you highlighted in your report in an academic staff meeting thus fulfilling your request for us to review the issues that were raised in your report. Looking to maintain the high standard we strive to deliver, we pay particular attention to the following recommendations:

Exam Duration and Essay length

The differing exam lengths across modules with the same numbers of credits, were highlighted. The report also focussed on the length of time given to write an essay that demonstrates knowledge: you suggested an allocation of one hour for each essay.

Our review noted that examination times within the School had been slightly higher than those of the rest of the Faculty. Since the last round of examinations the School of Biology has agreed to standardise the length of exams for 10- and 20-credit 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.

The school concluded that the period allowed per question should not be further reduced as a choice to alter the overall length of examinations had only just been recently made therefore there has not been sufficient time to look at the result of those changes. Information regarding module assessment is available to students prior to module enrolment.

Marking Criteria and Summary Comments

All academics receive printed marking criteria. The importance of following the criteria to ensure parity in assessment was made at our academic staff meeting. All academics in the School have been reminded of the necessity to annotate summary comments on scripts and to highlight any evidence of relevant, supplementary reading appropriately. It has been highlighted that comments should justify the mark awarded as described in the marking scheme (e.g. evidence of supplementary reading for >70%), and that academics should refer to this in their comments.

Assessment Load Discrepancies

We understand the concern regarding the potential for over-assessment, particularly for 10-credit modules. As a school we *do* feel there is a place for 10-credit taught modules at all levels of our

undergraduate programmes. These modules provide students with flexibility and breadth in their studies that we would not be able to offer otherwise. Because of the differences in content it would be restricting to standardise assessment across these. However, we are aware that the coursework load of some modules needs reducing to make it proportional to the credits received. We have taken action on this and hope this issue will have been resolved in the coming academic year.

Yours sincerely,

Programme Leader, Applied Biology

Programme Leader, Biology