

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:	Biological Sciences
Subject(s):	<i>Genetics and Human Genetics</i>
Programme(s) / Module(s):	
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

. 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?

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 stated aims and ILOs are fully consistent with the programmes delivered and student achievement. The Genetics and Human Genetics BSc programmes are well balanced, with clear evidence of high quality teaching and students developing a good level of understanding and knowledge. They are gaining an appropriate level of training and experience in both theoretical and practical aspects of the subject. The four years MBiol is an effective extension, providing the opportunity for an extensive research project as well as some taught modules, which are assessed by continuous assessment. Based on the written reports, the projects involve substantial novel research and were suitably challenging. The level of understanding and knowledge demonstrated by the various components of coursework were of a high standard and consistent with a masters level qualification.

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.*

Based primarily on a review of module descriptions, reading a sample of 3rd examination scripts and assessing a selection of project reports and dissertations, I am satisfied that the aims and ILOs are being achieved by the majority of students. The student performance is fully consistent with those in similar research led universities.

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 broad range of assessment methods are employed, including MCQ, short answers questions, essays, practical reports, posters and talks. The breadth of assessment and both the quality and level of questions is commendable. However, there is significant variation in assessment between modules which is unnecessary and potentially confusing to the students. For example 10 credit courses can have either a 90 or 120 min exam. Short answer question may or may not be included in exam papers but additionally the number to be answered can range from 4 to 8 in a nominal 1 hour period.

There was some discussion as to whether short answer questions are appropriate at the third year level and I personally do not have any problem with them as it allows for marking accords the curriculum but it also provides an opportunity for different types of question. However, most short answer questions tend towards a default essay style and based on written comments, some examiners appear to expect too much regarding content considering the time allowed. ~This will potentially limit the number of high marks given.

There is an argument that the students are being over examined. This is a general consequence of modularisation which is exacerbated by the 10 credit modules. These modules offer flexibility for the students and I am not in favour of removing this. However, it is important when structuring exams and designing questions, that the best students have an opportunity to express themselves fully and are not constrained by time. Therefore fewer questions, with a longer time to write each essay would be beneficial - I would certainly recommend that, at level 3, they have only one essay per hour and if there is a short answer section it is limited to 4 answers in 1 hour.

Reviewing the assessment marks it was apparent that for a number of modules the exam had relatively low averages (eg 1115, 1132, 2182) and in a few cases the continues assessments were not discriminating between students, with very high class average (eg1132, 1234, 2182). Such anomalies need to be reviewed and the assessments modified appropriately. I was pleased to note that the three instances I identified last year as problematic were apparently resolved this year.

The marking, second marking and moderation was almost without exception fully transparent with good annotation of scripts and clear indication of marks given and where significant discrepancies had occurred these were resolved in a fully open way. However, such disparities tend to result in a mark average, which is not always the most appropriate outcome. Examiners need to be cautious that they have fully considered each case and not just be conciliatory.

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 students have an extensive range of assessments allowing for a broad range of skills and knowledge to be appropriately rewarded. I was happy that the level of achievement for the majority of students was fully consistent with them having received an excellent training and tuition.

Although the final year Genetics students did relatively well, the biologists as a whole did not perhaps achieve as many first class marks as one would hope. However, there was a very large group with 2:1 marks. It is possible that this relates to the demanding exam structure, which may limit opportunities for the best students to excel.

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.

This is the first year of the MBIol program in Genetics. This is a good development and the structure of the 4th year is distinctive compared to the previous three year course. It provides excellent opportunities for the students to develop their skills as researchers. It is interesting that the taught modules are all examined by coursework but this seems appropriate. ~The projects were written up in the style of a paper which is a good exercise. However this does not appear to offer the opportunity for an in depth literature review or more detailed description of methods etc, which could be considered a shortcoming. The students are all required to choose this route by the end of year 2, and they are not allowed to do a 40 credit research project in the 3rd year. This has the advantage of reducing the number of project students but it means that some of the best students do not get this opportunity until the fourth year when they are then asked to commit to a far more extensive project. If this were not the case and transfer was allowed in the 3rd year I believe more students would choose this. The other consideration for Genetics students is that the available taught modules are very limited. It would be useful if other options were open, possibly from other Schools. However I appreciate that the low numbers of students does not warrant additional modules just for these students.

My specific concerns about three modules last year, most critically Human Genetics and Advanced Human Genetics appear to have been fully resolved.

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.

Research is embedded in the full program, it obviously influences the curriculum, is reflected in the taught modules, particularly in the 3rd year, and is predominant in the projects which are of a very high standard.

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.

There was a marked improvement this year with the newly devised process. The organisation of materials into modules, the availability of coursework across all four years, the exam scripts, detailed breakdown of marks, statistical analysis and spreadsheets including all students. This was exemplary and made the process of assessment far more efficient.

- 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 - again exemplary

- 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 provided with all the papers and assessments and these included model answers. I feel that the exams were appropriately rigorous and the minor corrections and suggestions I made were adopted. I have concerns about exam structure (see above) and will specifically consider this when reviewing next year's exams.

- 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, all 3rd year exam scripts and project reports were available and well organised allowing easy access to any chosen script or project report.

In general the scripts were clearly marked and annotated, giving short explanations for the marks given. Occasionally these comments did not fit the descriptors which formally define the mark boundaries. It is advisable that examiner are reminded of these to ensure consistency.

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

In the 3rd year the MBIOL students have an extended literature review (3399) and those choosing a 20 credit project (3021) appear to generally write a literature review equivalent to a dissertation. I am not aware of the specific choices offered but these varied in content. I do however have some concerns that the 20 credit projects are generally a literature review and felt that in some cases these were potentially over marked. It would be advisable to consider if this module should be renamed or the types of task reviewed to require more creative cutting edge research elements. Certainly these should be challenging and address specific questions which will required the student to read and develop a good understanding of current primary literature.

- 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 was wholly satisfied with the Board of Examiners and the recommendations made. We were given the opportunity to discuss the programs, the examination process and procedures in detail. This year there was a significantly improvement as a defined profiling system was in place which was both fair and effective.

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

Mitigating circumstances were reported where appropriate however none affected the outcome. The process seemed robust and fair.

Other comments

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

During our meeting with students, they were overwhelmingly positive about the courses. The only real issue seemed to relate to variation between modules with respect to amount of work required and inconsistency with respect to assessment and exam structure. Homogeneity is not good but unnecessary variation is not appropriate and this should be considered when reviewing modules. I have made comments about exam structure above.

Feedback for students was only available for some modules (first semester). It would be very interesting and potentially useful to have an effective review from final year students about the full program. Currently this does not appear to be available.

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 Genetics; MBiol, BSc Genetics

Many thanks for once again acting as our External Examiner, and for reviewing our Programme so positively.

The principal suggestion that you have made for improving the way we examine our students relates to the short-answer questions which comprise the 'Section A' of a number of our final-year examinations. Currently, these require the students to answer a selection of 8 questions from a possible 10. In accordance with your suggestion that this imposes a possibly unrealistic perhaps too onerous burden on students within an examination setting, and that we should reduce the number of questions required to be answered in these sections, we now propose to amend these papers so that students are required to attempt 5 questions out of a possible 8 in the hour allotted.

With regard to your comments concerning the MBiol programme, it is not quite correct to suggest that the students taking the 20-credit research project in their 3rd year of study do not get the opportunity to write a comprehensive literature review through the requirement to submit the results of their experimental work in the form of a short paper, since they subsequently do have to submit a literature review for separate assessment. This programme is a new one, and it will be instructive to see how it develops over the next few years.

You also raised the issue of generally high marks in continuous assessments of a number of modules. In many cases, these elements were associated with practical classes, in which historically it has been very difficult for students to obtain a poor mark, unless non-attendance was the cause. In one instance you alluded to a module code that I could not identify (1132) – I suspect that this might refer to my own first-year 'Introduction to Genetics' module (1232), which includes four in-course assessments that are 'open-book' in nature. Unsurprisingly, the performance of students is good in these assessments, but importantly, these provide a means to ensure that students undertake revision of the course material at regular intervals throughout its delivery. This is reflected in the generally good performance in the unseen examination, in which performance is very positively correlated with that in the assessments. Ironically, this relates to your comment concerning variability between modules in the amount of work students are required to undertake – it has been a perennial complaint of first-year students that BLGY1232 requires more work than other 10-credit modules at Level 1. However, I remain unrepentant on this aspect. This is (I believe) the only module where the students are given a breakdown of how time should be spent on the various components of the module – based on the 100 hours/10 credits assumption of the University – and it is no coincidence that in terms of student outcomes this is the most successful module containing a substantial examined component at Level 1.

I think that the current cohort of students, due to graduate in 2015, will prove to be a very good one, so I look forward your visits during the coming academic year.

Best wishes,

Programme Leader