

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):	Neuroscience
Programme(s) / Module(s):	
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	B.Sc

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?

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

I have thoroughly enjoyed my four years as external examiner and found it to be a very positive experience. Over the four years of my tenure the neuroscience degree has grown from strength-to-strength with large numbers of students obtaining first and upper second class honours. There is no doubt in my mind that many of these students have achieved a standard of excellence that is equivalent to or higher than other courses in neuroscience that I am aware of. There is also no doubt that this outcome is largely a result of the dedication and commitment of the neuroscience teaching staff.

The course provides students with a comprehensive range of specialist knowledge and skills along with generic skills. It provides an excellent foundation for those who wish to pursue a career in neuroscience but also supplies the skills essential for the world of work. Students are provided with a mixture of compulsory and optional courses, so to some extent, they can 'tailor' the course to their personal needs and interests. In third year the Advanced Topics courses provide a challenging introduction to contemporary issues in neuroscience. They also provide a comprehensive range of topics. All students also have to take an option in Scientific Skills which provides them with an understanding of how experimental science works along with essential skills in experimental design etc. All third year students perform a project under the supervision of a member of staff. Many students take laboratory projects. It is commendable that Leeds still provides students with the opportunity to work in an active research laboratory; many institutions have now no longer offer this possibility. Students who do not take a lab-based project write a grant application. This is

a very imaginative alternative to a library-based dissertation as it forces students to think about the mechanics of science. During my time as examiner I have had the privilege of reading some excellent dissertations and I believe that many of them have led to publications in peer-reviewed journals. Finally for third year, the Integrative Biomedical Sciences module deserves comment. This module teaches small groups of students *in vivo* skills. Very few institutions provide undergraduates with training in this area and yet such skills are in high demand especially in the pharmaceutical industry. This makes the Leeds degree particularly attractive to those that may wish to pursue a career in this area. Second year provides a good foundation for third year. There are excellent modules in Neurobiology, Mechanisms of Brain Function and Experimental Skills. One of the highlights of my visits to Leeds was to attend a practical class where students were recording intracellularly from snail neurons; a task that many masters' students would find challenging. There is also a tutorial system which many students found beneficial although feedback was variable on this and there was a feeling from some students that some tutors were more committed than others. First year provides students with a basic introduction to experimental science along with an introduction to neuroscience, pharmacology etc. One comment I would make here is that Introduction to Genetics is an optional course and yet genetic approaches to understanding the nervous system have become increasingly important over that last decade or so. It might be worth considering making this a compulsory option?

The March meeting with students and External Examiners is an excellent example of good practise. On the four occasions I met with students from all three years, I was impressed by their enthusiasm for the course. This was also a good forum for students to raise any issues to a neutral person regarding the course. Over the years I conveyed any concerns the students had directly to members of staff or via my examiner's report. These issues were always considered carefully and often resulted in minor changes to the course. Often they were simple issues e.g. students wanted to spend more time examining prosected brain specimens. Students also found podcasts of lectures to be particularly useful.

For the earlier years the principal method of examination is MCQ papers along with coursework etc. In later years students are principally examined by essay answers. Some students I spoke to found this transformation difficult but I understand that this issue is being addressed in second year tutorials. I was able to peruse a good range of scripts and dissertations during my visits. It was usually clear from the annotation of the scripts and comments on dissertation mark sheets why a particular mark was awarded. Some of the essay answers I read were outstanding and I felt that markers could have been more generous. For example some second year essays were described as 'excellent' or 'outstanding' and yet were only awarded between 70-75%! Markers should be encouraged to use the full range of marks- essays that are outstanding should be marked in the 90-100% range! I found the examination process to be very clear and it was obvious to me about what criteria to apply when making a decision about students in the discretionary band and those with mitigating circumstances. My views were always taken into consideration by the BOE and discussed accordingly.

Finally I have enjoyed my time as External Examiner at Leeds and I thank you for this opportunity. The course is in excellent shape; however there is always room for continued improvement and I hope my comments will assist in this process.

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 for the neuroscience programme and aims are stated clearly for each year of the BSc Neuroscience and BSc Neuroscience in Relation to Medicine course on Campusweb. The ILOs are entirely commensurate with each level and there is a clear progression from one year to the next.

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.*

I have experience of similar courses at the universities of <>, <> and <>. The standards are equivalent and easily meet national benchmarks.

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 range of assessment methods are used which test a variety of skills and knowledge

The quality of teaching is very high; this is reflected in the excellent results obtained this year. Assessment is rigorous and fair.

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.*

This year the standard achieved was exceptional; approximately 40% of students were awarded first class honours and very few obtained less than lower second class honours. Even the poorest students had a good basic knowledge of the subject.

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.

See comments above in my final year report.

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.

Leeds is an excellent research university and this is reflected in the course which is taught by experts with national and international reputations for their research work. As a consequence staff are able to offer challenging, state of the art projects and teach contemporary areas of neuroscience with authority.

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**

I was mentor to <>. We communicated initially via Email and I met <> at the March Examiners' meeting. <> required minimum assistance and quickly familiarised <> with the courses and exam procedures.

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- it was comprehensive and clear.

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. I was able to comment on all draft papers. All questions were appropriate and well-constructed.

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?**

I perused a selection of dissertations and marked scripts. In most cases, they were well annotated and comments were very helpful in understanding why specific marks were awarded.

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

There was a good range of choices. The method of assessment was good; both supervisor and an independent examiner awarded marks for the project report and the supervisor also awarded marks for lab performance where a lab project was undertaken.

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 were excellent. I was able to attend the meeting and was entirely satisfied with the process and decisions made.

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

Yes- however no students fell into these categories this year.

Other comments

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

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 Neuroscience

BSc Neuroscience (Industrial)

BSc Neuroscience (International)

BSc Neuroscience in Relation to Medicine

MBiol, BSc Neuroscience (Integrated Masters)

Firstly may I take this opportunity, on behalf of myself and the whole neuroscience team, to thank you for your superb efforts over the last four years to ensure that our neuroscience course here is appropriate and rigorous enough to allow us to produce excellent graduates? Your vast experience, enthusiasm, insight, attention to detail and thoughtful comments have really helped us to continually develop and improve the course and your input will be sadly missed. It has been especially useful in the light of your wide experience of other such courses which has ensured that we maintain and enhance the aspects of our course that make it individual, valuable and enticing to students and future employers.

In response to your specific comments raised in your examiner's report, I would like to start by thanking you for your recognition of the dedication and commitment of the neuroscience teaching staff. As Programme Leader, I feel privileged to be able to call on the efforts of the other academics involved since I know that they are fully committed to educating the neuroscientists of the future. We are pleased that you consider that the range of subjects in the course is comprehensive yet still enables flexibility for the students in the overall choice of modules. This is so critical when one considers the differences in destinations of our graduates, whether into employment or further education so it is important that you judge that there is enough scope for tailoring of their course to suit their individual needs. Indeed, I am delighted to say that already the majority of our neuroscience graduates from this year have found employment or are continuing in further education, which supports your comments regarding the course. We also appreciate your positivity regarding the laboratory projects and practical classes – we will strive to maintain these since you consider them a stand-out feature of our programme compared to courses at other universities.

One concern that needs addressing is the comment that some students find that there is variability in the commitment of tutors at times. This is critical since students are entitled to be exposed to a fair and equal support system in their time at Leeds. This is something that will be an immediate focus for me.

I respect your comment regarding the introduction to genetics module that is optional for level 1 students. With current course structure, if this also was to be considered compulsory then we would lose the flexibility for semester 2 but perhaps we need to consider whether this module is more relevant to the neuroscience course than the endocrinology module. This valid comment will form a discussion point at the next neuroscience programme meeting and will form part of the SWOT analysis that I am currently undertaking on the course.

We appreciate the time that you take to meet with the students in March each year – it is good that this “neutral” environment has enabled frank discussion; although we are pleased that it’s mainly positive, we will continue to act on points raised by students in this forum. We will indeed be addressing the issue of further familiarising students with essay writing which will hopefully alleviate some of their concerns on this matter.

I am delighted that you have raised the point regarding rewarding excellence in essay writing, one that is particularly relevant in the current employment market since it ensures further and appropriate discrimination within the cohort of our top students that will enhance their employment chances. I will ensure that the full marking range is used at all times to facilitate discrimination at all levels.

We are pleased that you consider that we are allowing students the opportunity to achieve the aims and intended learning outcomes of the course and that there is clear progression over the years. It is also reassuring that our poorer performing students have good basic knowledge.

In conclusion, I would like to thank you for your constructive and positive report and I would like to ensure you that I will address points raised to continue to improve on our course. I will wish you the very best for the future and hope that we may keep in touch in the future regarding neuroscience education since your input is greatly valued.

With warmest regards,