

The University of Leeds
EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT
ACADEMIC YEAR: 2011– 2012

PART A: GENERAL INFORMATION*Subject area and awards being examined:*

School of:	LIFE SCIENCES	Subject(s):	Bioscience
Programme(s) / Module(s):	General, Plant Science, Biotechnology	awards: (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc.)	M.Sc.

The completed report should be attached to an e-mail and sent as soon as possible, and no later than 6 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.

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.*

As mentioned in previous reports, aims and outcomes are entirely appropriate for a taught M.Sc. and achieve a remarkably high standard in the departing graduates. Once again their project presentations and their ability to talk about their work were impressive and conveyed great enthusiasm for the subject matter.

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 consider this programme to be of a high standard that would do credit to any major university in Ireland, Britain or elsewhere.

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.*

This is a complex issue in a course with so many diverse components and an à la carte menu for the participating students. Achieving consistency and fairness requires vigilance and nothing will ever be perfect. However, various issues have been raised by the External Examiners over our several years in the role, and I think I should simply say that the staff involved in running the course have been quick to respond and in general are bending over backwards to maintain the best possible professional standards.

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.*

As previously, the project and the culminating poster presentations represented the climax of the M. Sc. experience for these students. For a second year, we as External Examiners were invited to the poster presentation and were able to see for ourselves i) the remarkably high standard achieved by many of the students; ii) the very wide range of interests and skills catered for; iii) the tremendous enthusiasm of the students, virtually without exception, for this experience. As mentioned last year, the students again wished the projects could have been longer - even at the expense of a couple of the special options. I believe the School is looking at ways in which perhaps a couple more weeks might be possible, but inevitably there are organisational constraints, and there is a lot to be said for sending your customers away thirsting for more!

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. 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.

The previous time round the External Examiners were somewhat concerned that a very good course was being unsettled and damaged by disruptions to staffing in important areas of the curriculum. This time the problems seem to have been absorbed/ironed out and also a drop in the overall student numbers has perhaps relieved some of the strain of running a demanding course. There have been some significant adjustments of course content but nothing of the general significance flagged in italics following the question.

7. 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.

This is a very research-active School and this underpins the entire course. The taught material and the practical project work reflect this, providing the students with inspiration and good example.

The Examination Process

8. 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

9. 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?

- *The coherence of the policies and procedures relating to external examiners and whether they match the explicit roles they are asked to perform.*

Yes

10. Was sufficient assessed/examination work made available to enable you to have confidence in your evaluation of the standard of student work?

On each occasion the full range of written work was made available for the External Examiners to sample at random over two-thirds of a day making possible a good overall general assessment of both the work itself and the assessment procedures.

11. Were the administrative arrangements satisfactory for the whole process, including the operation of the Board of Examiners?

Yes. On every occasion, as well as observing/participating in the consideration of each case, all three External Examiners were given the opportunity for feeding back impressions and detailed comments verbally to the assembled staff.

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

Yes

For Examiners involved in Mentoring Arrangements

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.

Other Comments

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

Most issues I have raised previously have been dealt with. However, one recurrent issue remains and merits continuing consideration. The student intake is diverse and there is a gulf between the expectations and requirements of home-based/European/N.American students on the one hand and those from Africa, Asia etc. All the students tend to say that most or all the problems with the course are at the beginning. I think the School has tried over the time I have been an External Examiner to respond to the second group of students' need for adequate guidance. There is, however, still the other side of the coin: some of the British students talk of some of this introductory material as being 'a total waste of time', and of course this is because they have done it before in undergraduate courses. In open forum discussions they did raise the suggestion that some of the early Core Skills components might be made optional and this may be worth considering. A second related point was whether this material should be marked or not.

Another minor gripe from some of the students concerns timing of some of the material – e.g. that they were learning how to put together a good Ph. D. application after the deadline for actual Ph. D. applications.

**Faculty of Biological Sciences
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UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

30 January 2013

Dear

EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT 2011/12
MSc Bioscience
MSc Biotechnology
MSc Plant Science and Biotechnology

We appreciate your positive feedback on our MSc and acknowledgement of the work that we have done in improving the programmes over the years. We are glad that you found the Poster presentation form at productive and a good method for seeing the abilities of our students and thanks for making the efforts to come twice in the autumn for this and the examining events.

We will continue to investigate ways to extend the student project time as highlighted in your report. This year students will spend approximately one extra week in the laboratory by delaying the submission of dissertations by about a week.

Regarding the quality of the early material particularly for home students that may overlap with undergraduate training, we have changed our first semester core modules so that introductory material such as library use is restricted to orientation week and changed the content of the core module 1 to contain more challenging and useful content.

The change of core module 1 also pertains to the concerns about the timing of the PhD application assignment. We have removed this assignment and updated the module to more scientifically challenging assignments that encourage novel thinking and will help prepare students for the research environment and their careers.

Yours sincerely,

Director of Taught Graduate Student Education