

The University of Leeds

EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2014– 2015

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

Faculty / School of:	Faculty of Biological Sciences
Subject(s):	<i>Neuroscience</i>
Programme(s) / Module(s):	BSc Neuroscience, BSc Neuroscience in Relation to Medicine, MBIol, BSc (Integrated Masters) Neuroscience
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?

Yes

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.*

I looked at a selection of coursework and exam papers from years 2 and 3 and considered how the content related to the ILOs.

Systems Neurophysiology (year 3)
Inherited Disorders (year 3)
Advanced Topics in Neuroscience I (year 3)
Advanced Scientific Skills (year 3)
Advanced Topics in Neuroscience II (year 3)
Research Project in Biomedical Sciences (year 3)
Experimental Skills (year 2)
Scientific Skills (year 2)
Molecular Neuroscience (year 2)

The course encompasses a breadth and depth of study commensurate with the ILOs and level of award. Examples of best practise include the quantitative analysis question for Advanced Scientific Skills and the development of analytical/critical skills through critical review of recent scientific literature.

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 level of attainment of the students easily meets that in comparable institutions and is commensurate with 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.*

I viewed some really innovative assessment methods that provide the students with an excellent opportunity to meet the learning outcomes. I have commented on this in more detail in the 'other comments' section.

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 first class work that I viewed was fairly assessed and truly excellent. Overall I have no concerns about the distribution of marks. The assessment is maintaining the very highest of academic standards and the University can be proud of the students that it is graduating.

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.

N/A

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.

This is research led education at its best. The students benefit enormously from the opportunity to be taught and guided by research active academics. This is most particularly relevant to the practical experience they have, especially through the third year project, but also influences the impressive depth of knowledge evidenced by the very best of the student work.

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

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.

I made two visits to the department this year, in the spring and the summer. In the spring visit I was given the opportunity to visit the teaching labs, I was provided with an excellent overview of how the programme is delivered and I also met with a representation of undergraduates from all 3 years. The organisation of the summer exam papers, by student, rather than module, was very helpful.

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. Very comprehensive and very detailed. My only suggestion is that it would also be helpful in future to be provided with the mark sheet for the BMSC3301 i.e. with the marks from the different components of the project assessment.

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. For year 2 there was a good combination of prescriptive and broader questions.

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 given access to the majority of second and third year coursework and exam scripts. Exam papers were accompanied by detailed model answers. I was provided with analyses of the distribution of marks for each module. Overall, both the coursework and exam scripts were carefully marked and the process of second marking/moderation was evident. Through discussion with the programme director I was assured that satisfactory mechanisms are in place to ensure academic integrity. The majority of the student work that I viewed was well annotated, however there was some inconsistency in this between exam papers and it would be good to encourage all markers to adhere to guidelines that request the provision of comments to justify marks awarded for individual pieces of work. The use of feedback/assessment grids e.g. as used for the projects, works well but it would be good to leave a bit more room on these forms for free text as well. My only strong recommendation with respect to annotation is to ask that markers annotate the project dissertations. This would be very helpful for the examiner in terms of highlighting, in the text, the strengths and weaknesses of the project, but would also be informative for the students.

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

I looked at examples of each kind of third year project; lab-based, grant proposal and Science and Society. For the practical project I gather each student spends 8 weeks more or less full time in the lab. I gather the students work in small groups on a joint investigation. I would like to find out more about how this is managed in terms of distilling individual contributions to the team project however from what I have seen so far I have no specific concerns in this regard. On the contrary it would seem that for some students this way of organising the projects gives them experience of an impressive range of techniques in a relatively short period of time.

I read two superb dissertations for the 'grant proposal' assessment. This innovative project requires the student to demonstrate understanding of the scientific literature, experimental approaches and the scientific process by designing their own original project proposal. It provides strong students with the opportunity to really excel and develops clarity of thought, precision and creativity.

The project dissertations are accompanied by a 'reflection' written by the student to convey how the engagement with the project has impacted on their progression and career plans. This is an excellent idea and there were some very positive comments e.g. one commenting that the project had 'completely changed' their attitude to research to the extent that they have now enrolled on an MRes.

I also read an excellent dissertation for The Science and Society module. In the interests of data protection I won't go into details, but would like to comment that I was highly impressed with the depth and detail in the project.

Overall, my initial impression is that the project provision for the students is exceptional.

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?

Unfortunately I was not able to attend the exam board this year. However, a borderline 2.2/2.1 case was brought to my attention and I am satisfied that this was fairly managed and that the final recommendation was justified. I also noted the flexible weighting between years 2 and 3 for determining the overall degree classification. This is an excellent way of ensuring that the degree classification takes into account the student 'trajectory' when this is appropriate.

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

I was unable to attend the exam board so am not aware of details of this however I have no concerns in this regard.

Other comments

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

I am grateful to the academic and support staff who made both my visits very informative and engaging. The most enjoyable part of the visits was meeting with the undergraduates. More than 20 gave up their time to meet with me, a very impressive representation and they are clearly very satisfied with their chosen course of study. They were an articulate, well informed and enthusiastic group and it was a genuine pleasure to discuss their courses with them. They commented very positively on the friendly and helpful support provided by their tutors. They were also very appreciative of some of the detailed feedback provided. For example, for one of their assessments they are required to make an oral presentation. The tutor provided a podcast with feedback for each student, one student commented that the detailed feedback <> received was longer than <> actual presentation! The students indicated that they find the transition from MCQ/short note style assessments to longer in depth essays a challenge and I note this is something that they also commented on to my predecessor. I expect they would appreciate some mechanism that helps them to develop the necessary essay writing skills as they progress through the programme. They also suggested that they would like to know what steps are taken to respond to their comments i.e. 'closing the loop'.

I was also very impressed with the opportunity that the students are given for practical research work including intracellular recordings from snail neurones. There are many Masters courses that would not offer this level of experience and it is a distinctive feature of the department that this practical experience is still given high priority. Such provision is resource intensive in terms of staff time and cost, but I do hope that it will continue. It provides a great platform for those intending to go onto careers requiring practical research skills, but it is also an excellent way for students to acquire key skills that are transferrable to other career paths; problem solving, team work and analytical skills.

There were some really clever innovations in some of the courses for assessment and feedback. In Experimental Skills (year 2) the students assess their own course work against a set of criteria and on this basis state what mark they think their work should be awarded, at the same time highlighting areas that need attention. The work is then assessed by the module coordinator. This provides the students with a great opportunity to develop a self-awareness of their strengths and weaknesses and of the skills that they need to develop.

In sum, I viewed exemplary practise for the Neuroscience programmes. I look forward to finding out about the programmes in more depth during my term as examiner. In particular, next academic year I would like to look at the provision for the virtual learning environment.

Faculty of Biological Sciences
Student Education Service

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



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

8 October 2015

Dear

RESPONSE TO EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT 2014/15

BSc Neuroscience – all programme variants

BSc Neuroscience in Relation to Medicine

MBiol, BSc Neuroscience (Integrated Masters) – all programme variants

Firstly, may I take this opportunity to thank you for your kindness in taking up this External Examiner role for our University and in proving to be such a positive and thorough examiner. We are delighted that you consider the level of attainment achieved by our students as appropriate and that we are graduating some really excellent students. We are indeed very proud of the students that we are graduating and the majority of neuroscience academics attended the recent graduation ceremony to let the students and their parents know this. We all enjoyed some lovely conversations with our students and their family members and will continue to stay in touch with them to provide ongoing support on their future pathways into employment or further education. I know that you are an External Examiner for other similar institutions and that you come from a very research active university so your comments regarding the standard of our research-led education as being of such a high standard are much appreciated. It is also especially pleasing to hear such positive reports from the students themselves about the course and the level of support and feedback that they receive from the neuroscience staff members. We will endeavour to continue to provide this level of support and the different styles of feedback that they say are useful to them. We are also pleased that you consider that the resources and efforts to provide the snail practical classes are worthwhile – it is good that you believe that this experience may enhance our students' practical skill base for future careers but also helps to develop other transferable skills.

Thank you for your positive comments regarding the provision of third year projects – it is pleasing that you liked the Science and Society-style dissertations since these prove popular with students for whom perhaps a career in research is not appealing. With respect to the lab-based projects, we in fact have both individual and group projects, so not all lab projects are joint investigations. Regardless of this, many students do partake in, and enjoy, the group lab-based projects. Your point regarding monitoring of appropriate contributions is a valid one that is carefully considered. As you point out, to-date, there have been no real concerns but we will continue to keep a close eye on these situations and would appreciate your input to this. We are glad that you like the grant proposal component of the literature based projects – it does seem to be a useful way of discriminating the best students, especially with the cohort who chose these projects.

I am glad that the majority of exam scripts were well annotated by assessors, but I share your concerns regarding the inconsistency between scripts. This is an ongoing concern and we are striving to get academics to provide the appropriate level of feedback at all times. I will continue to try and achieve this with neuroscience academics. I have taken note of your strong recommendation for annotation of the dissertations since you have raised a good point regarding the importance of this level of feedback for the students themselves. I have already informed the Module Manager and the Director of Student Education of this recommendation and have asked that this is an agenda item on the next Biomedical Sciences

Programme Committee meeting since this would affect all BMS programmes. I hope that we can report back to you regarding this for next year, since although we are in a state of change as we consider e-marking in the future, your recommendation could be instigated without too much disruption.

The students mentioned that they find the transition from short answer questions to essays difficult and, as you point out, this is also something that the previous External Examiner had noted. We have in fact tried to address this and have a dedicated tutorial in Level 1 where the students discuss writing an essay with their tutor, then write the essay and receive detailed feedback. There is also a number of formative assessments in the form of essays in semester 1 of Level 2 (BMSC2118 and BMSC2117), with feedback in the sessions or on the VLE. The students also have essay feedback tutorials in BMSC2223, after their summative essay, that help to prepare them for their exam, which is the form of short essays. On the VLE, we have exemplar scripts for many of the modules that involve essay writing or generic feedback in the form of video podcasts. At the end of semester 1 of Level 3, when the students have completed their lectures, but are yet to have their exams, I hold an informal meeting, discussing what each lecturer expects in their advanced topic essays. This is additional to the final lecture for each ATU where lecturers discuss potential essays. I am not sure what else we can do in the circumstances since, otherwise, students could become inundated with formative assessments. Nevertheless, I endeavour to let the students know exactly how much advice and feedback they receive on essay writing. With respect to letting the students know the ensuing actions by staff following their comments on the course, we publish the minutes of the staff student forum, where similar points are raised, on the VLE but it is important to let them also know that we are acting on matters arising. Therefore, I will suggest provision of another document just showing how action points arising from issues raised by the students have been acted upon by staff. I will also include these in my introductory slides for the returning and new students.

Your comments regarding the innovative approaches in assessment to meet the learning outcomes are particularly welcome – we will continue to monitor and evolve these as appropriate.

We would be delighted to provide you with further information regarding the virtual learning environment. Perhaps I could take the time to show you particular features of this when you visit in March to review work and meet with the students?

Finally, thank you once again for your thorough and helpful report. I look forward to working together with you over the next few years to provide the best programme possible for our students.

With warmest regards,

Programme Leader

Tel:
Email: