

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):	Zoology & Environmental Biology
Programme(s) / Module(s):	Zoology BSc Zoology (Int) MBiol, BSc Zoology (Ind) BSc Ecology and Environmental Biology BSc Ecology and Environmental Biology (Int) MBiol, BSc Ecology and Environmental Biology (Ind) BSc
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 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

There are no matters that require attention that would preclude the programme being offered again.

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, I was provided with the response of the School to my 2013-2014 report.

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

The programmes remained consistently competitive with similar programmes in other universities, including fellow Russel Group institutions. Changes were made both in response to external examiner's comments, internal reviews and student feedback. Improvements include outline answers and moderated marking of closed-book examinations, a wider choice of projects and improvements in feedback to students on their performance in assignments and examinations.

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 aims and intended learning outcomes for all programmes continue to be appropriate both in relation to structure and content of the course as a whole, and of individual modules.
 - The standards are entirely appropriate with the level of awards made in both BSc and MBIol programmes.

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 programmes are comparable with similar programmes in other universities with which I am familiar, including my own (The University of _____ and others at Bachelor's or Master's level that I either have taught at or served as external examiner or validation officer.
 - Teaching is of consistently high quality and includes a significant practical component, including residential field courses. Teaching includes a good level of generic and transferrable skills, including quantitative analysis that enhances the student's career prospects. Semester 5 units are more challenging as is appropriate at Master's level, and additionally prepare the students for further post-graduate study.

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 design and structure of the assessment methods continues to be entirely appropriate. There is a good mix of assessment methods and I understand and agree that some of the variation relates to the aims, learning outcomes and structure of the individual modules. However the assessment approaches vary from (more commonly) 100% closed-book examination to 100% assignment and I would question the rationale of this in the final year and suggest a mix as an assignment element is important in relation to analysis and interpretation of information while closed-book examinations are valuable to test student's knowledge and understanding.
 - The students commended the quality of provision. Useful and informative unit outlines are available to the students. Feedback to students on their performance in assignments was generally good but did appear to vary, a point also mentioned by the students in the feedback session.
 - I was able to comment on examination questions, and was given adequate time to do so. I am pleased that final year examinations are now consistently 1.5 hours in length. The breadth of questions is appropriate, including the challenging and wide-ranging paper that tests the student's knowledge of statistics in years one and two.
 - The type of question asked in the closed-book examinations is appropriate, with one or more essay-length answers required by final year students to test their depth of knowledge and understanding, plus essay and sort-answer questions in year two of the Bachelor programmes. However the number of questions to be answered varies and I feel that in the final year two questions (i.e. each of 45 minutes duration) are appropriate to adequately assess the student's level of knowledge, understanding and insight. I would likewise question the value of short answer questions in the final year as it is important that students are able to synthesise and integrate information. Differences in the contribution of the examination plus number and type of questions may account for the variations in student performance in different units and it is suggested that the marks are interrogated to see if this is indeed the case.
 - Annotation of examination scripts is generally good but once again is not always as informative in relation to justification for the final mark as I would like. It is also suggested that the summary statement justifying mark should make more reference to the marking criteria.
 - Moderation appears to be universal which is to be commended; and it is clear which scripts were moderated by the moderator initialling the agreed mark and, where appropriate, adding a comment(s) on the script.
 - Assignments are appropriate in relation to the level of assessment and are varied in relation to content and output.
 - I commend the 'Advanced Topics' units but note they vary in work-load and hence credit rating with BLG3214 Advanced Topics in Zoology attract 10 credits while BLG3133 Advanced Topics in Ecology and BLG3215 Advanced Topics in Evolution are both worth 20 credits. I suggest that BLG3214 is expanded and incorporates an assignment element (currently 100% examination) to more adequately challenge the students taking the Zoology programmes.
 - As in the past the standard of the projects and the resulting dissertation were entirely appropriate, and I commend the broad range of areas studied by students. Likewise the method of assessment was one again detailed and rigorous with reason for change when markers disagree by more than 10%.
 - I commend the detailed breakdown of marks I am pleased that now includes means and variance to facilitate inter-module comparisons.
 - The system of mark provision via spreadsheets works very well and I commend the efforts of the academic and administrative staff to ensure that marks (including from other schools) were available to the examination board.
 - The arrangements for the classification of awards were very good, with each student given due and appropriate consideration. The final classification of borderline candidates is based on a rubric relating to the relative number of units achieving the higher classification which I commend.
 - The quality of teaching, learning and assessment methods are very good as indicated by student performance statistics, with an appropriate distribution of grades. As stated above, the standard of assessment is appropriate, both in terms of student performance, but also from available hard copy documentation and on-line material - and commensurate with other Russell Group universities.

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 academic standards demonstrated by the students are comparable than programmes in other similar institutions.
- I had the opportunity to talk to students from all years of their programmes and all were articulate and very positive regarding their programmes. As stated above they would recommend their programme to prospective students.
- Students were provided with an opportunity to demonstrate their performance on basis of examinations, projects and assignments and I could only take a view of all methods of assessment. On this basis the best performing students were excellent and commensurate with similar programmes elsewhere.

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.

- Good practice:
 - Range of assignments that test student's knowledge and skills in data manipulation and analysis, knowledge and understanding of the literature (including knowledge gaps through writing a 'virtual' research grant proposal) and oral presentation skills
 - Statistical analysis and data manipulation embedded in the programmes.
 - Students able to obtain feedback on their performance in the examinations.

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.

- From unit content, assignments and examination questions, some of the modules, particularly in the final year, are informed by current research – and the students are also appreciative of this link.
- Projects often relate to current research of supervisor(s).

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

No

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.

- Material was sufficient. I had access to examination papers, outline answers where available, examination scripts, assignments and projects (including assessment) either on-line or as hard copies.
- I was pleased that this year I was provided with examples of assignments but this did not include examples from all units and it is suggested that this be provided in future.
- Staff were once again very helpful in providing additional material upon request.

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, all information was available, including in advance of the examination board.
- My responsibilities were clear plus regulations relating to the examination board's role and responsibilities, including in relation to borderline candidates.

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 draft examination papers in relation to outline answers in relation to essay questions.
- The nature and level of questions were appropriate to the cohorts and commensurate with similar programmes elsewhere in the UK.

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, in relation all methods of assessment
- Assignments, examination scripts and projects were clearly marked
- Justification of individual/agreed mark for projects is very clear and transparent
- Annotation of examination scripts once again remains variable and more reference should also be made to the marking criteria to aid the moderator and external examiner.
- It was clear which scripts were examined by the moderator on basis of moderator's initials against the mark.

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

- Yes, once again the choice of subject for the dissertations was appropriate, and informed by staff research/teaching interests in many cases.
- Both the method and standard of assessment were entirely appropriate, with clear justification for the mark awarded.
- Comments justifying the individual supervisor, moderated and agreed mark were clear.

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 prior to and during the board (which I attended) were entirely satisfactory
- The performance of each student was given due and appropriate consideration.
- I was again entirely happy with the recommendations of the board.

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

- Yes appropriate procedures are in place in relation to the mitigating circumstances/discretionary board and the recommendations and as appropriate inform the decisions of the exam board.

Other comments

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

I would like to thank all of the academic and administrative staff for the provision of both before and after my arrival at Leeds of all required information, and helping to make my visits a pleasant and informative experience over the four years that I have acted as external examiner. Likewise thanks to those students (a progressive increase year-on-year) who took the time to meet me and my fellow examiners in April.

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



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

26 October 2015

Dear

RESPONSE TO EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT 2014/15

BSc Zoology – all programme variants

BSc Zoology in Relation to Medicine and Veterinary Science

BSc Ecology and Environmental Biology – all programme variants

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

MBiol, BSc Ecology and Environmental Biology (Integrated Masters) – all programme variants

Many thanks as ever for your very thoughtful comments on our degree programmes. We're delighted that once again there are no matters of urgent concern, and we particularly note the following points that you raised in your report:

1. *The design and structure of the assessment methods continues to be entirely appropriate. There is a good mix of assessment methods and I understand and agree that some of the variation relates to the aims, learning outcomes and structure of the individual modules. However the assessment approaches vary from (more commonly) 100% closed-book examination to 100% assignment and I would question the rationale of this in the final year and suggest a mix as an assignment element is important in relation to analysis and interpretation of information while closed-book examinations are valuable to test students' knowledge and understanding.*

We will raise this issue with managers of the modules concerned and ask them to consider increasing the range of assessments, although we are mindful of the importance of avoiding over-assessment and overloading students with coursework at key periods of the year. We are currently going through an extensive process of assessment auditing for all our programmes, which will enable us to examine module/programme-level assessment (both volume and type) and potentially modifying as appropriate. In light of recent staff losses and replacements, we are also examining programme content and delivery, which may lead to a change in assessment type and consolidation of module credits. In trying to address the issues raised concerning variation in assessment approaches, and in line with related external examiner's recommendations, we have increased the time for all 10-credit module exams to two hours (this is also standard across the faculty). This is in recognition of the fact that one hour is an appropriate length of time for an essay question and accounts for the time required for students to adequately consider and understand questions. Additionally, we will consider whether a standard 2hr/3hr exam template might be useful for staff to use.

2. *Differences in the contribution of the examination plus number and type of questions may account for the variations in student performance in different units and it is suggested that the marks are interrogated to see if this is indeed the case.*

The analysis of marks in relation to exam questions (number/type) is in hand and is being done in conjunction with the assessment auditing. It is partly to address this that we are developing standardised exam templates that staff may use, if appropriate.

3. *Annotation of examination scripts is generally good but once again is not always as informative in relation to justification for the final mark as I would like. It is also suggested that the summary statement justifying mark should make more reference to the marking criteria.*

We will emphasise this point to all teaching staff.

Yours sincerely,

Programme Leader: Zoology

Tel:
Email:

Programme Leader: Ecology and Environmental Biology

Tel:
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