

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:	Biological Sciences
Subject(s):	
Programme(s) / Module(s):	Biology (all relevant year 1 to 4 modules)
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

No – there are some straightforward recommendations for the next academic year, but more substantial recommendations will take a year to implement.

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

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 programme aims and intended learning outcomes are delivered effectively by the programme structure and modules and map well with the BSc and MBIol awards.

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 aims and learning outcomes are in line with the relevant national benchmark statement, FHEQ, and with similar programmes in comparator institutions.

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 used, though in some modules this is more limited than in others. The process for double marking and moderation is appropriate, though this could be more explicitly documented in some modules. Student performance was similar to comparable institutions, though there were fewer firsts in the Biology programme than in the other 'specialisms'. Please see comments at the end.

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.*

Academic standards were comparable to similar institutions, though as noted above, the number of first class awards was lower in the Biology programme than in the other programmes. This was somewhat curious in that the threshold for a first (68.5) is lower than in most other research intensive institutions. One reason for this – noted by all the externals – relates to the large number of 10 credit modules, the lack of consistency in the structure of final year examination papers, and the consequential over-assessment of students. Please see comments at the end.

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.

I understand that there is now widespread lecture capture, which is to be welcomed.

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.

Most of the final year modules reflected the research interests of the module leads, which demonstrates the influence of research on the curriculum. The 40 credit research projects and the 80 credit MBIol projects contained some impressive 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

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.

I received all necessary information, and support during the visit was excellent.

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.

All in order.

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?

I received all draft papers for comment. I have commented previously on the lack of diversity of questions on some papers, and this was the same this year. Please see comments at the end.

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 was provided with sufficient student work to view. In my view the level of annotation on some scripts was inadequate and would not be helpful to a second marker or a student. Please see comments at the end.

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

Yes – choice appropriate, and method and standard of assessment.

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?

Yes – everything was conducted professionally.

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

Yes – these matters were discussed and agreed at an internal meeting and reported to the externals.

Other comments

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

I will make comments in three areas, all of which have been noted previously, and by more than one external. The first two areas can be dealt with during the course of the next academic year – the third issue will require some strategic decision-making.

1. I thought that the questions on some papers were all traditional, stereotypic, inviting little more than the regurgitation of factual information – ‘Discuss this’, ‘Describe that’ etc. If I were starting with a clean sheet, I would consolidate all second and final year modules as 20 credits, with a common exam structure in year 2, and a different but common one for the

final year. In the final year, all papers would be 3 hours, with students required to answer 2 questions, one from each of two sections. Section A would be problem-based questions – plot graphs, interpret data, design experiments etc; and section B would be ‘essay-style questions’ but with a more imaginative style than at present.

2. I think there needs to be greater quality control over script annotation and mark justification, linked explicitly to the published marking criteria. Some scripts I saw had only one word of summary comment: ‘Good’, extending to ‘Very good’, or ‘More detail required’. Such comments are of little value to a moderator or to a student who views their scripts to improve future performance. I think that each script should have at least 3 lines of summary comment/mark justification, to be checked by the Teaching Office, and referred back to the marker if this is not done. There also appeared to be inconsistent notation of wider/supplementary reading. As a related issue, if it is agreed that no-one can mark to an accuracy of 1%, consideration should be given to introducing a stepped marking scheme i.e. 52, 55, 58, 62, 65, 68 etc, with the mark allocated on the basis of how well an answers fits with the marking criteria for each 10% band.
3. All of the externals had difficulty in understanding how the Biology programmes had ended up with modules of 10 and 20 credits in years 2 and 3, vastly different ratios of methods of assessment (100% examination, 100% coursework, and multiple combinations in between), and examinations of widely differing structures/levels of question choice, which in some cases would not allow students to demonstrate their talent and depth of knowledge e.g. final year essay questions of 1 hour on one paper, and 30 minutes on another, with some 15 minute short answer questions on one final year paper (in my view there is no place for short answer questions in final year examinations). One external describe this situation as ‘anarchic’. The key question is how has this situation been allowed to develop. I recognise that I hold views that would not receive universal support. However, I feel that the students are over-assessed, and one reason for this is the relatively large number of 10 credit modules in years 2 and 3 – the volume of assessment in two 10 credit modules is invariably greater than in one 20 credit module. As an outsider looking in, there would appear to be a number of examples where two 10 credit modules cover ‘neighbouring areas’ that could be combined to form one 20 credit module; in other cases, a 20 credit module and a 10 credit module could be combined to form a revamped 20 credit module. From experience, this is not a development that will succeed through ‘minor tinkering’, or an invitation to staff to consider this as a possibility – a high-level decision would need to be made after discussion, and a willingness among staff to deliver a unified outcome. In my view, this would be greatly beneficial to students who commented to me about the uneven workload between modules with the same credit value, and the highly variable structure of second and final year examinations.

Student Education Office
Irene Manton Building
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**UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS**

19 November 2015

Dear

RESPONSE TO EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT 2014/15

BSc Applied Biology – *and all programme variants*

BSc Biology – *and all programme variants*

MBiol, BSc Applied Biology (Integrated Masters) – *and all programme variants*

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

We appreciate the time taken to act as External Examiner for the degree programmes detailed above and for offering such a thorough review of programme content, structure and assessment. In striving to maintain the highest standards, we constantly review the delivery of these degree programmes and are pleased to be able to pay particular attention to the following opinions of the External Examiner:

1. Standardisation of module examination formats

In line with the 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) 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, if appropriate.

With this in mind, we believe that the range of modules open to Biologists and Applied Biologists is one of the focal attractions of the programmes. Because of the differences in module content it would be restricting and often not appropriate to standardise assessment across them. The School is also mindful that different students from a diversity of backgrounds prefer and excel at different types of assessment. Students can view module assessment information as this information is available to them prior to enrolment.

2. Script annotation and mark justification.

Staff are constantly reminded in Academic staff meetings, prior to the examination period, to annotate summary comments on scripts and to highlight any evidence of relevant, supplementary reading appropriately. The idea of asking teaching support staff to screen for scripts with insufficient annotation is a good one and we have discussed this possibility with the Pro-Dean for Student Education and Faculty Education Service Manager. Screening will now be put in place.

Some markers already adopt a stepped approach to exam marking. To insist on such a marking scheme may restrict some markers from giving what is, in their professional judgement, the correct mark for a given piece of work relevant to other scripts.

3. **Standardisation of module formats**

We appreciate the opinion to create fewer modules with a broader remit. As a school we have reviewed the delivery of both 10- and 20-credit modules. The modules provide students with flexibility and breadth in their studies. As part of our on-going review we have asked the students if, when complementarity would allow, they would prefer consolidation of 10-credit modules into single '*revamped*' 20 credit modules. The students have vociferously stated that they appreciate the distinction the School has drawn in creating 10-credit modules and the choice that this offers. However, 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 both a change in assessment type and consolidation of module credits.

Yours sincerely,

Programme Leader, Applied Biology

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