

The University of Leeds
EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT
ACADEMIC YEAR: 2015– 2016

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

Faculty / School of:	Biological Sciences
Subject(s):	
Programme(s) / Module(s):	Biology
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

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

The introduction of an algorithm for the objective determination of degree classes for students in the so-called 'discretionary zone' is a welcome development. However, the provision of details on such students to external examiners is unnecessary, as is the 'invitation' to the externals to comment on such students at the Board of Examiners. I did not look at the work of these students and nor should I do so – except anonymously – and as part of a random sample. Once the externals have confirmed that module marks are fair, accurate and consistent, all degree classes are then determined automatically and there should be no further consideration of any student (in the absence of extenuating circumstances), no matter how close a student may be to a higher degree class.

I will comment later in this report (as I have done in all previous reports) on the apparently random distinction between modules of 10 and 20 credits (particularly in the final year), the inconsistencies in assessment workload between modules of the same and different credit values, and the lack of consistency in the structure of examination papers, which is unhelpful to students. Either staff disagree with these views or there is a lack of engagement, because little progress has been made. Evidently, change cannot be achieved by encouragement, so there needs to be a Faculty policy on these matters to which all staff would be expected to comply.

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 is 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 is similar to comparable institutions.

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 are comparable with similar institutions, but there were relatively few first class marks in the final year essay questions, and little evidence of wider reading. As such, the marks were accurate, but disappointing. The substantial difference between the high number of first class marks for coursework and their absence in exams is a concern. 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 did not detect any major changes from the previous year.

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.

As might be expected, this was demonstrated in the final year projects and modules linked to the research interests of staff.

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 asked to mentor <<>>. I spoke at length with <<>> shortly after <<>> appointment, met <<>> during the visit to Leeds to meet with students, and again during the recent Exam Board meeting.

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 for the most part. I think the School is still struggling to some extent not to accept that once you have devised an algorithm to determine the degree class of border-zone students, there is no further discussion to be had (nor should there be).

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 – the model answers were excellent.

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?

All exam scripts were provided, with coursework available online. For the most part, marks and script annotation were appropriate; however, this was not consistent. Identification of wider reading was patchy, some marks were generous for the quantity/quality of the script, and some comments would not be valuable as feedback to a student.

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

Yes

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, excellent organisation with comprehensive information available for every student.

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

Yes, and this was done.

Other comments

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

There are a number of features of the Biology degree that should be commended. Students are provided with a wide choice of modules, there are well constructed marking criteria, script annotation has been improved compared with previous years, there is a strong commitment of staff to students, and the quality of work produced by some students is impressive.

The other more general comments have been made before. My main concern is that I do not understand the process by which a module is determined to be 10 or 20 credits. Is this at the discretion of the module leader/team? There seems now to be consistency in that all 10 credit modules have a 2 hour exam and for 20 credits it is 3 hours. But within each exam, the number of sections and questions seems very variable. I think this has major consequences for students and how well they perform as it must be difficult to allocate time to individual questions, when the number of questions to be answered in an exam of fixed duration varies so much. In some papers, students can write an essay with around an hour for a question, and in a different section of the same paper, or a different paper, the essays have to be written in 30 minutes, but are assessed by the same criteria. All final year essay-type questions should have the same time allowance – at least one hour.

In the modules I looked at there was a consistent pattern in which more students achieved a first class mark for coursework than for the exam, the most extreme example being Evolution and Population Genetics where 24/49 students got a first for coursework but only 1/49 in the exam and only 6/49 overall. Exam marking was fair and quality of answers disappointing, with very little evidence of wider reading.

I am concerned by the approach in the Applied Animal Science module in which one of the numerical/calculation questions was marked out of 14, and the mark then scaled up to 100 – which means that each mark out of 14 equates to around 7%. I would prefer to see much more sensitivity in the marking scheme.

Overall, I can only repeat earlier comments. There needs to be a fundamental overhaul of the programme structure – all modules to be 20 credits, much greater consistency in the exam structure, and oversight of modules to ensure broad consistency in the workload of students.

I am not sure if the Head of Faculty/School/Department was away, but we did not meet with him/her, which was disappointing.

The externals met with a large group of students who were enjoying their Leeds experience – great campus, good Open Day, range of modules and flexibility. Their constructive comments for desirable changes included module titles (some misleading), awareness that students made tactical module choices to get higher marks, and variable workloads between modules (more in some 10 than 20 credit modules).

As this is my last year I would like to thank <<>> and the Teaching Office team for their excellent support.

Faculty of Biological Sciences
Student Education Service

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



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

7 November 2016

Dear

RESPONSE TO EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT 2015/16

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 would like to begin by thanking you for acting as External Examiner for the past four years. Your time and thoughtful comments over this period have been invaluable in helping us reflect upon and improve our degree programmes. We are pleased to note that your comments reflect the enhancements we have made to the programmes since your previous report, including the improvement in script annotation and feedback, and the introduction of quantitative guidelines for considering the overall performance of students in the discretionary zone students. We are also pleased that you continue to recognise our strong commitment to our students and the benefits of providing them with a wide choice of modules. Here, we are pleased to respond to the following specific points raised:

1. Use of quantitative guidelines ('performance profiling') for discretionary zone students

The Examiner's input is indeed not a required component of the process. The facility to see the mark profiles for discretionary zone students is merely to allow the Examiner to examine the marks and relevant scripts should he or she wish to do so.

2. Standardisation of module lengths and formats

The wide range of 10 credit modules we offer in relation to 20 credit modules and the variation in the forms of assessment across all modules is a longstanding issue. With respect to the number of 10 credit modules we offer, this is something that we continually review at School level and in consultation with our students. The general view of the staff remains that the provision of a wide range of modules is one of the attractive features of our programmes simply because it is easier for students to excel if they are studying subjects that satisfy their intellectual curiosity. Under the current structure of the Biology and Biology with Enterprise programmes, students are able to tailor their studies to match their interests as closely as possible. This 'choice' argument carries less weight for modules in the first year because many subjects are compulsory. For this reason, for 2016-2017, we have introduced two new 20 credit first year modules, BLGY1128, The Living Planet, and FOBS1135, The Basis of Life, to the Biology programme. FOBS1135 has also been introduced to the Biology with Enterprise programme. These new 20 credit modules combine aspects of previously offered 10 credit modules and allowing us to maintain our core first year teaching in a more streamlined form. The new modules were introduced under the direction of our Pro-Dean for Student Education who shares many of your concerns around our current means of delivering teaching and assessing student progression. A review of these areas is being conducted at Faculty level and will feature this year as part of our Student Academic Experience Review. There is also a University-wide drive to make a distinction between the need to make robust decisions on student

progression and attainment in a high-quality, controlled, and equitable way and the need to provide students with regular, meaningful feedback on their level of knowledge and understanding without creating a marking juggernaut.

The point raised about differences in assessment formats is something we will be reviewing at School-level with input from the Faculty. As noted, we have already standardised examination lengths for 10 and 20 credit modules. We agree that making a more consistent differentiation between short-answer questions and those requiring longer essay-type answers could be beneficial to students.

3. The nature of marking in BLGY3105 Applied Animal Science

Concern was expressed at the sensitivity of marking on the calculation-based question on this exam, which was described as being marked out of 14 and then scaled up to generate a percentage mark. In this case, half marks are awarded for the different steps of the calculation, so effectively it was marked out of 28 thus achieving the higher level of sensitivity required. This may not have been clear to the students so we will no longer use half marks in this way and indicate that answers are marked out of 28 to clarify the situation.

Yours sincerely,

Programme Leader, Applied Biology

Programme Leader, Biology