

## 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):	<i>Genetics</i>
Programme(s) / Module(s):	Genetics
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	BSc

**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](mailto: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*

There are no matters for urgent attention

**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*

**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 range of modules, both required and optional, provided the breadth and depth to fulfil the learning outcomes of the program. The content was both appropriate and stimulating. The structure provided good student choice and subject coverage. One area where the structure of the program could be reviewed is in relation to the presence of both 10 and 20 credit modules and their different workload profiles, as discussed later. I reviewed a range of examination papers from modules specific to the Genetics degree and taken by students on other degree programs. I also examined a range of literature and laboratory project work. The marks awarded for individual pieces of work were in line with expected standards and appropriate quality control processes through double marking are in place.

**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 core degree content is both appropriate and relevant to the subject and matches similar degrees with which I have experience in other institutions. The final year specialisms naturally reflect the wide range of relevant research expertise within the School and again provide appropriate and relevant course material. This is an exciting and up to date course delivered at an appropriate level with good student choice and up to date, research-led content.

**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 majority of modules are assessed through a combination of in course assessment and examination, the exception are literature review and laboratory practical modules. Assessment format consistency is an area where the program could benefit from a more integrated approach. Although one size does not fit all, there are opportunities to streamline the assessment profile of different modules, both in terms of examination and course work balance, but most noticeably in examination paper format. The difference in examination formats and expectations between 20 credit and 10 credit modules is an area where review could introduce greater consistency. I would also recommend that alignment of exam papers is explored, such that the number of questions in each section, and the value of these questions in each section that count towards the total paper mark, is consistent. This would enable students to better understand the expectations in each paper.

The quality of teaching as demonstrated by the quality of the answers as judged against the model answers was clear. What was surprising was the limited additional reading evident for the final year answers. The mark schemes and well annotated scripts clearly identified, across the range of modules that I examined, where additional reading was evident. Students can only be encouraged to undertake, and include, additional reading, and it was surprising that so few had availed themselves of the opportunity to maximise marks in exam papers through this route. The different assessment methods used in course work provided different opportunities for students to demonstrate their insight and understanding of the program, however, some further diversity in exam questions from essay style to quantitative or analytical questions would provide new opportunities to demonstrate additional learning outcomes.

**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.*

Yes, the students were able to demonstrate their achievements through the combination of course work and exam questions. The standards are high but as highlighted above, for a number of exam questions the limited evidence of additional reading impacted on the ability of the examiners to award marks at the highest level on the scale. The marking criteria are well defined, and for most scripts the detail of script annotation provides evidence that the marking schemes are well adhered to and it is clear how different marks have been awarded against the well defined criteria. The range of student abilities to convey their understanding of the subject, as defined by the answers and marks awarded is in line with other institutions. One area where students could better demonstrate their achievements would be through additional reading and use of this in answering exam questions, both through material provided in individual modules as extra reading, and through personal study. In giving feedback to students in earlier years, this point could be emphasised.

**5. For Examiners responsible for programmes that include clinical practice components, please comment on the learning and assessment of practice components of the curriculum**

Not relevant

**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.*

This is my first year as external examinee

**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.*

The course content is clearly influenced by research, both established underpinning research, and at the cutting edge. The breadth of relevant academic research expertise within the School that aligns with the degree program is one of its strengths. The final year research project highlights the involvement of students in the active research programs within the school that are aligned to this degree program.

**8. Where the programme forms part of an Integrated PhD, please comment on the appropriateness of the programme as training for a PhD**

Not relevant

**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**

Not relevant

**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.*

All relevant material was available and well organised within the room made available to the examiners. It was clear that should we need any additional information this could be made available. The Teaching office staff were immediately on hand to answer any queries or requests.

**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 in electronic format and very easy to access. The policies and procedures were available in support of my role as examiners.

**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, draft exam questions were provided well in advance and the opportunity to review and recommend revisions was very well organised. The level and nature of the draft questions were relevant and my only comments related to points of clarity to remove any possible ambiguity in one or two draft questions. My comments were acted upon.

**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, all examination papers and project work was available which enabled confident evaluation of standards. The scripts were for the vast majority very well annotated with justification of the marks awarded, in one or two cases the level of annotation was more limited and I would recommend that the very high standards of script annotation against the well-defined marking criteria are adopted by all staff teaching on the various modules. Not only does this enable the external examiner to better assess work standards and marking, but also provides valuable feedback opportunity to students.

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

Yes, the range of research topics for dissertations provided very good student choice at an appropriate level. The standards of assessment were appropriate with double marking but given the 40 credit nature of the research dissertation, a mark difference of only a few percentage points can have an impact on the final degree mark classification. As it currently stand, mark differences of more than 10% triggers the need for markers to consult and agree their final marks. In some cases the agreed different marks when incorporated into the calculation, based on the different weightings of the different markers can have a material effect on the final degree mark. This process gives a different outcome to for example averaging the two different marks. Given the heavily weighted influence of the final year project (40 credits) on the final course mark I would suggest reviewing the mark system for the projects to ensure that examiner discrepancies have a limited impact on the overall mark. This point is particularly relevant where the final mark puts a student into, or excludes them from, the boundary classification algorithm.

**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, the administration was well organised. The exam board fell on the day of an AUT strike but appropriate arrangements were put in place to ensure the smooth running of the exam board.

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

Yes, mitigating circumstances had been reviewed by the School and were where necessary included in the exam board discussion in an appropriate and highly confidential manner.

**Other comments**

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

I have no further comments.

**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 Genetics – and all programme variants**

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

Many thanks for acting as our External Examiner for the Genetics degree programmes. I am sorry that I wasn't in Leeds during your visit – I was at an workshop in that week.

I am pleased to learn that you approve of our programmes, and that there are no matters arising that require urgent attention.

You raise a couple of points that we have been looking at over the years, in particular the assessment and workloads associated with 20- and 10-credit modules. We have been moving towards a more common framework for assessment (most recently in trying to harmonise the length of time it is expected that students will take for standard essay-type answers in examinations for 10- and 20-credit modules), but as you point out, sometimes one size doesn't fit all. As modules taken by Genetics students are available to students across a wide range of programmes (including some outside the Faculty), any change in the format will have to be looked at by a wider group than simply the Genetics Programme Team. A review of teaching delivery and assessment is being conducted at Faculty level and will feature this year as part of the School of Biology's 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 about external reading is very well made and could be key to helping increase the proportion of students getting first class marks, although this number is not out of line with other programmes. We do emphasise the importance of this to our students, but there seems to be a very conservative view among most students that it is sufficient simply to regurgitate the lecture material as accurately as possible. In my own final year module "Applied Genetics" I run an exam workshop as the final teaching session in the semester where I go through previous years' essays and try to highlight the need to demonstrate a wider appreciation of the subject than simply appears in the course material. Maybe part of the problem is that we now provide so much of the course material online via the VLE that students confuse reading this with reading further around the course content.

For the forthcoming academic year I will again provide students with examples of exam questions to highlight where external reading should be provided, and illustrate how relevant material is incorporated into an exam answer. This should help those students whose exam scripts would otherwise achieve a 2.1 as a result of exclusive reliance on lecture material.

It is interesting that you should raise the issue of examiner discrepancies in marking the project. The two markers are often assessing the work they see from two completely different standpoints. Consequently, it's not surprising that markers can differ in the mark they award on the basis that there might well be justifiable reasons that two examiners reach a different mark, given their different standpoints and academic requirements from the report (i.e. appreciation of the depth and breadth of the field for the supervisor, and clarity of understanding and expression having greater importance to the lay reader). We have addressed the point you raise about different weightings of the different markers - both will be equally weighted from this academic year.

Again, many thanks and we look forward to working with you again this year.

Best wishes,

Programme Leader