

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):	BSc/MBiol Zoology BSc/MBiol Ecology and Environmental Biology (all relevant 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

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?

No. I did request that <<>> act as my mentor during the first year of appointment. <<>> provided me with a copy of <<>> previous report and we were able to discuss the process both before and during the External Examiners meeting.

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 aims and ILO are delivered very well by the programme structure and range of modules. I am satisfied that these map well with the degree awards. The students I spoke with were very satisfied with the courses that they had chosen and appeared very enthusiastic.

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.

I am satisfied that the aims and ILOs meet with the relevant national benchmark statements, FHEQ, and with similar programmes in comparator institutions in which I have worked.

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, although in some modules this is more limited than in others. For example, some 10 credit modules I examined were assessed by an exam only (e.g. BLGY3214), whereas others were a mixture of exams and coursework (e.g. BLGY3122). Furthermore, it was unclear to me how the weighting of exams vs. coursework was decided for modules with the same number of credits (e.g. BLGY3122: exam 80%/cw 20%; BLGY3214: exam 70%/cw 30%). It would be useful to see if there is a general formula and whether staff use it, particularly if some students might potentially be disadvantaged if it is not applied. The process for double marking and moderation is appropriate. Student performance was similar to comparable institutions, although the number of first class degrees in the programmes that I examined seemed low.

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 academic standards were comparable to similar institutions but I am slightly puzzled as to why more students did not achieve a first class degree (especially given the 68.5% threshold is lower than most other research intensive institutions). I note from <<>> that one reason for this 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. I recommend that this is investigated.

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.

As this is my first year, I cannot comment. However, I note some excellent annotation of exam scripts which could provide excellent feedback to students. This is not consistent across modules.

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.

Many of the final year modules I examined reflected the research interests of the module leaders, which demonstrates the influence of research on the curriculum. However, the curriculum could benefit by including research led conservation biology within the Faculty (see below). I note that some of the 40 credit research projects and the 80 credit MBIol projects were excellent and publishable.

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 mentored by <<>>, through telephone calls, email exchanges and mostly via conversations during EE meetings. <<>> was particularly helpful in clarifying aspects of the role during the June meeting and provided ample opportunities to discuss specific issues that I raised during the process. <<>> provided some insights as to what the Faculty was doing well and where it could improve based on his experience to date.

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 of the material was sufficient. Although a steep learning-curve, I benefitted from mentoring by <<>> and found the support provided by the School during the meetings to be 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.

Yes. This was made available to me on the VLE on request.

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 received draft examination papers/assessment for each semester. The level of the questions were appropriate, although the conservation biology related questions could be refreshed to reflect advances in the field (see below).

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. However, due to large number of scripts per module I focussed my attention on Year 3 work only. I will endeavour to assess Year 2 work as a priority next year. There were very good examples of script annotation, which matched the marking criteria, although this was not consistent across modules.

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

Yes. The choice was varied and the method and standard of assessment was very good.

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. A very small number of students were borderline and the criteria was applied appropriately.

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

Yes. I understand that these matters were discussed and agreed at an internal meeting and reported to the external examiners.

Other comments

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

The content of the Ecology & Environmental Biology and Zoology BSc programmes was of a high standard and I note that the students enjoy the diversity of modules available to them. However, given that the Ecology & Environmental Biology programme is changing to become Ecology & Conservation Biology, I suggest that the conservation biology content is refreshed and made more explicit. Given that conservation biology is a 'mission-based' discipline, the programmes (and assessment) could benefit from a greater understanding of human interactions. For example, in the paper 'Whose conservation?' (Science, 2014) Georgina Mace outlines an agenda for conservation science, and distinguishes four historical phases in the framing of conservation. These 'framings' have underpinned legislation to protect biodiversity, both of which students should be taught in order to be effective in their subsequent employment.

I had to time to assess most of the Year 3 modules (and will focus my attention on the Year 2 modules next year) and found both the exam structure and weighting of module assessment to vary considerably. This was a point of concern raised by the students who I spoke with in my previous visit. There was also considerable variation in the annotation of scripts, with some examples of both good practice (which provided excellent feedback and tended to refer to the marking criteria) and bad (few words which did not relate to the marking criteria). Poor practice should be highlighted by moderators and returned to markers for rectification prior to the external examiner meeting. All external examiners agreed that it would be sensible to consolidate all second and final year modules as 20 credits (although I note from speaking to students that they like the choice of modules). I recommend 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 showing their ability to interpret data, plot graphs etc; and section B would be essay-style questions that allowed students to demonstrate critical thinking rather than simply repeating factual information.

Although I was satisfied that the modules had been assessed appropriately, I was concerned that there were not more students achieving >75% for modules/projects. What is preventing students from achieving higher grades? This may be because the marking criteria has not been applied properly across modules, but I think it is more likely that the exam structure hinders students from demonstrating their talent and depth of knowledge. Furthermore, the number of 10 and 20 credit modules might lead to students being over-assessed. If this is to be reviewed internally, greater scrutiny of exam structure and the weighting of assessments across modules should be considered.

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 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 for your thoughtful and detailed comments on our degree programmes. We're delighted that there are no matters of urgent concern, but we particularly note the following points that you raised in your report that require some attention:

1. *"A broad range of assessment methods are used, although in some modules this is more limited than in others. For example, some 10 credit modules I examined were assessed by an exam only (e.g. BLGY3214), whereas others were a mixture of exams and coursework (e.g. BLGY3122). Furthermore, it was unclear to me how the weighting of exams vs. coursework was decided for modules with the same number of credits (e.g. BLGY3122: exam 80%/cw 20%; BLGY3214: exam 70%/cw 30%). It would be useful to see if there is a general formula and whether staff use it."*

We recognise that we use a range of assessment methods at Level 3, but if considered across the whole programme we think this is a positive aspect as it enables students to use different skills and attributes. We do not currently have a general formula for weighting exams vs coursework, but it is something that we are now trying to address, beginning with designing a common exam format (instigated by the new DSE and Exams Officer). Guidance about standardising exam vs coursework is also being discussed as we seek greater commonality among modules and programmes and we will be taking advice from our Faculty colleagues in this respect.

2. *"The academic standards were comparable to similar institutions but I am slightly puzzled as to why more students did not achieve a first class degree (especially given the 68.5% threshold is lower than most other research intensive institutions). I note from [redacted] that one reason for this 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. I recommend that this is investigated."*

We do have a large number of 10 credit modules at Level 3 (we note that the students do like to have this choice), although this is steadily changing and will continue to change with the creation of new Advanced Topics modules (e.g Advanced Topics in Animal Behaviour for 2016/17). Over assessment is an aspect that we are concerned by so we are undergoing an audit of assessments to try and limit this. The lack of consistency in exam papers is being addressed (as stated above). One possible explanation for why students are not attaining First class degrees is because they are not providing evidence of further reading beyond the lecture material, which is necessary for First class marks, as stipulated in the marking criteria. With fewer modules and exams they may have more time for this reading.

3. *"The content of the Ecology & Environmental Biology and Zoology BSc programmes was of a high standard and I note that the students enjoy the diversity of modules available to them. However, given that the Ecology & Environmental Biology programme is changing to become Ecology & Conservation Biology, I suggest that the conservation biology content is refreshed and made more explicit."*

We note that the students do value the diversity of modules (many of them 10 credit). Nevertheless, it is especially at Level 3 of the Ecology and Zoology programmes that we are looking at re-designing our Advanced Topics modules. This will reduce the number of modules and assessments, but it has been motivated by recent staff appointments in conservation biology and so the programme will certainly see a refreshed and more explicit content (Advanced Topics in Conservation planned for 2017/18).

4. *"I had time to assess most of the Year 3 modules and found both the exam structure and weighting of module assessment to vary considerably. This was a point of concern raised by the students who I spoke with in my previous visit. There was also considerable variation in the annotation of scripts, with some examples of both good practice (which provided excellent feedback and tended to refer to the marking criteria) and bad (few words which did not relate to the marking criteria). All External Examiners agreed that it would be sensible to consolidate all second and final year modules as 20 credits (although I note from speaking to students that they like the choice of modules). I recommend a common exam structure in year 2, and a different but common one for the final year."*

The exam structure, format and weighting of module assessments are being addressed (see above) and we expect to use a common exam format in due course. We provide first and second markers with the marking criteria and strongly encourage their use. We will continue to impress on staff the importance of doing this. Some consolidation of modules is under way (especially Level 1 and Level 3), but we do wish to keep some 10 credit modules to maintain the flexibility and choice that our students like. Our Pro-Dean for Student Education 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.

Yours sincerely,

Programme Leader: Zoology

Programme Leader: Ecology and Environmental Biology