

The University of Leeds

EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2016-17

Part A: General Information

Subject area and awards being examined

Faculty / School of:	Faculty of Biological Sciences
Subject(s):	<i>Biochemistry</i>
Programme(s) / Module(s):	
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	BSc, Msc

Part B: Comments for the Institution on the Examination Process and Standards

Points of innovation and/or good practice

Please highlight areas of innovation or good practice within the programmes or processes you have been involved with in this box.

This is my first year as external examiner for the Biochemistry degree programme at Leeds. I have been extremely impressed with the way the course has been designed, its content and the quality of its students. The course aims to deliver a thorough training for the undergraduate students with an emphasis in years 1 and 2 on strong laboratory skills and numeracy. It is very pleasing to see students being challenged with quantitative problems and data handling exercises. The course is well balanced although naturally it reflects the interests of the research staff and so there is a molecular bias in its delivery. The final year is dominated by the project and the advanced topics modules. The latter represent an excellent way to integrate research interests of the staff into the curriculum in a timely and contextualised manner. In my opinion, this is one of the best Biochemistry courses I have come across. It is delivered with rigour and enthusiasm.

I had the opportunity to speak with a number of the students during a visit in March. The students said they appreciated the need for good laboratory skills and having access to well-trained and knowledgeable demonstrators. They also said they felt "pushed" in year 1, which was important as it prepared them well for year 2. This is in contrast to many other universities where students feel year 1 is easy and hence year 2 comes as a bit of a shock to the system! Overall, they also felt the exams were good and fair. The feedback on the year 2 lab reports was much better than in year 1, so the students felt that their complaints had been listened to and addressed appropriately. The students found that the mini-projects that they undertook after their year 2 exams were very informative and good fun – something they really enjoyed and got them prepared for year 3. This attention to detail – whereby students are prepared for each of the following years, is something that comes across very strongly and staff should be congratulated on this has been achieved.

It was clear from the examination performances that students who undertook a year in industry did very well indeed – with the majority getting high grades. The experience they gain coupled with their extra maturity places them in a strong position and the course allows them to flourish and develop to maximise their potential.

There are only a few minor quibbles that staff may wish to address. There was some concern that there is little differentiation between the Biochemistry degree and the Medical Biochemistry option. Staff may wish to consider putting on a further medical course or adding some more medically-orientation advanced topic modules in the final year.

The examinations process seemed to be well handled. The questions were fair, testing and spanned the breadth of the subject area. Most questions were set in an appropriate manner so as to allow students to demonstrated their breadth

of knowledge, allowing room for stronger students to show their extra reading and greater understanding. Overall, the scripts were marked fairly and were well annotated. There was some variation in the marking style but the marking itself was remarkably consistent across each course. Some academics were marking to the nearest 5% whilst others marked to the nearest 1%. The range of marks for each course demonstrated that some members of staff were more willing to use the full 100% scale – whilst others struggled to give marks above 80%. I would encourage markers to use the full scale. There were also a few answers where model answers were not available – these should be provided when the questions are set – it makes it easier for the externals to see what they are looking for in the answer. Nonetheless, the examination process and marking was extremely robust.

In summary, this is an excellent course that is exceptional in many ways for the high quality of teaching and delivery to its students. I would strongly recommend that the bespoke nature of the course is maintained to ensure that the students continue to benefit from its excellent design and content.

Enhancements made from the previous year

Please highlight any enhancements made to the programme(s) or processes over the past year in this box.

This is my first year as external and I am not aware of many changes that have been made. The students seem to be happy with the fact that their comments on feedback have been addressed.

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 major issues that need to be urgently addressed. I have mentioned some aspects that could be looked at – eg encouraging staff to use the full 100% scale when marking (some already do). I understand that there will be a new convenor for the Biochemistry degree – and I think convenors play an important role so it is important that whoever takes charge that they get to grips with the job at an early stage.

I think that it is important to meet with the final year students and during my meeting in March I only had the opportunity to meet with a handful of them. There may be better opportunities to meet eg during poster presentations or other such gatherings – but I know that this could cause logistical issues.

Finally, I'm not sure if final year project students get the opportunity to give a talk about their project work – and as oral communication is something that is important for scientists it may be something you could consider. It may be that you already do this.

For Examiners in the first year of appointment

1.	Were you provided with an External Examiners Handbook?	Y
2.	Were you provided with copies of previous relevant External Examiners' reports and the response of the School to these?	Y
3.	Were you provided with a External Examiner Mentor?	N

For Examiners completing their term of appointment

4.	Have you observed improvements in the programme(s) over the period of your appointment?	
5.	Has the school responded to comments and recommendations you have made?	Y / N
6.	Where recommendations have not been implemented, did the school provide clear reasons for this?	Y / N
7.	Have you acted as a External Examiner Mentor?	Y / N

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

8.	Is the overall programme structure coherent and appropriate for the level of study?	Y / N
9.	Does the programme structure allow the programme aims and intended learning outcomes to be met?	Y / N
10.	Are the programme aims and intended learning outcomes commensurate with the level of award?	Y / N
11.	Did the Aims and ILOs meet the expectations of the national subject benchmark (where relevant)?	Y / N
12.	Is the programme(s) comparable with similar programmes at other institutions?	Y / N
<i>Please use this box to explain your overall impression of the programme structure, design, aims and intended learning outcomes.</i>		
13.	Is the influence of research on the curriculum and learning and teaching clear?	Y / N
<i>Please explain how this is/could be achieved (examples might include: curriculum design informed by current research in the subject; practice informed by research; students undertaking research)</i>		
14.	Does the programme form part of an Integrated PhD?	Y / N
<i>Please comment on the appropriateness of the programme as training for a PhD:</i>		
15.	Does the programme include clinical practice components?	Y / N
<i>Please comment on the learning and assessment of practice components of the curriculum here:</i>		
16.	Is the programme accredited by a Professional or Statutory Regulatory Body (PSRB)?	Y / N
<i>Please comment on the value of, and the programme's ability to meet, PSRB requirements here:</i>		

Assessment and Feedback

17.	Does the programme design clearly align intended learning outcomes with assessment?	Y
<i>Please comment on the assessment methods and the appropriateness of these to the ILOs, in particular: 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. Students are assessed in a number of different ways. They are assessed on their practical skills through laboratory and project work – marks are given not only for design, results and understanding but also for technical ability. Students are also assessed through coursework, which normally involves an essay associated with a biochemical problem. Finally, students are examined through traditional examination papers under timed conditions. The latter test recall, understanding and reasoning. These assessment techniques are all appropriate for the course and the answers and results that have been produced from these various methods indicate that staff have been successful in achieving the appropriate learning outcomes stated in the course.</i>		

18.	Is the design and structure of the assessment methods appropriate to the level of award?	Y
19.	Were students given adequate opportunity to demonstrate their achievement of the programme aims and intended learning outcomes?	Y
<p><i>Please comment on 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 Biochemistry students are a strong cohort who have demonstrated not only detailed knowledge of their subject area but also through their project work have shown that they can apply their knowledge in practical ways. These are excellent students and the grades they achieved reflect their intellectual ability and the authoritative teaching and instruction they have received during their time at Leeds. I have been examiner at and the students at Leeds are some of the strongest I have come across.</i></p>		
<p><i>Please use this box to provide any additional comments you would like to make in relation to assessment and feedback:</i></p>		

The Progression and Awards Process

20.	Were you provided with guidance relating to the External Examiners role, powers and responsibilities in the examination process?	Y
21.	Was the progression and award guidance provided sufficient for you to act effectively as an External Examiner?	Y
22.	Did you receive appropriate programme documentation for your area(s) of responsibility?	Y
23.	Did you receive appropriate module documentation for your area(s) of responsibility?	Y
24.	Did you receive full details of marking criteria applicable to your area(s) of responsibility?	Y
25.	Were you provided with all draft examination papers/assessments?	Y
26.	Was the nature and level of the assessment questions appropriate?	Y
27.	Were suitable arrangements made to consider your comments on assessment questions?	Y
28.	Was sufficient assessed work made available to enable you to have confidence in your evaluation of the standard of student work?	Y
29.	Were the examination scripts clearly marked/annotated?	Y
30.	Was the choice of subjects for final year projects and/or dissertations appropriate?	Y
31.	Was the method and standard of assessment appropriate for the final year projects and/or dissertations?	Y
32.	Were the administrative arrangements satisfactory for the whole process, including the operation of the Progression and Awards Board?	Y
33.	Were you able to attend the Progression and Awards Board meeting?	Y
34.	Were you satisfied with the recommendations of the Progression and Awards Board?	Y
35.	Were you satisfied with the way decisions from the School Special Circumstances meeting were communicated to the Progression and Awards Board?	Y

Please use this box to provide any additional comments you would like to make on the questions above:

Other comments

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

Part C: School Response to External Examiner Report**Name of School and Head of School (or nominee)**

Title and Name of Responder:

Position*:

Faculty / School of:

Address for communication:

Email:

Telephone:

Programme Leader	
FBS/SMCB	

*If the individual responding to the report is not the Head of School please state their position within the School.

Completing the School response

The completed School response (including the full original report) should be attached to an e-mail and sent to the Pro-Dean for Student Education in the relevant Faculty. Following approval by the Pro-Dean for Student Education, the School must send the response (including the full original report) directly to the External Examiner. A copy must also be emailed to the Quality Assurance Team at gat@leeds.ac.uk. External Examiners should receive a formal response no later than six weeks after receipt of the original report.

Response to Points of innovation and/or good practice

Thank you very much for highlighting areas of the programme you consider innovative. We note your strong recommendation to maintain the current bespoke structure of the course. You have suggested providing greater differentiation between the Biochemistry and the Medical Biochemistry degree, respectively. A preliminary discussion was initiated to introduce specialised, smaller group tutorials covering either molecular or medical aspects of biochemistry during the second year and to follow those up with a broader choice of medically oriented Advanced Topic Units. This, of course depends on the availability of staff for teaching in these areas. There are also talks at Faculty level with Medicine and Health to introduce more medically orientated teaching into the curriculum.

Response to Enhancements made from the previous year

As you note, we have worked on improving the feedback provided to Year 2 students in practicals.

Response to Matters for Urgent Attention

If any areas have been identified for urgent attention before the programme is offered again please provide a specific response to them here:

- 1) Recommendation to use of the full, 100% mark scale: such matters are discussed at School staff meetings and we will continue to remind staff to use the full scale including marks at the higher end.
- 2) A new programme leader (convenor) appointment: has been appointed as the new programme leader from Aug 2017.
- 3) Possibility for the External Examiner to meet with the final year students will be considered for the next visit.
- 4) An opportunity for the final year project students to present their work: Currently, there is a 10 min viva which encompasses a short, informal presentation of the work by student to the academic panel, followed by a Q&A session, i.e. a combination of presentation and interview. We have considered in the past to introduce a public poster session instead (successfully used by Microbiology and Biological Sciences programmes within the Faculty) but due to lack of enthusiasm among the teaching staff on the biochemistry programmes this was not implemented.

Response to questions 1-7 (and related comments)

Schools may provide a general response; however, where Examiners raise specific points these must be addressed individually:

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Standards

Response to questions 8 to 16 (and related comments)

Schools may provide a general response; however, where Examiners raise specific points these must be addressed individually:

Assessment and Feedback

Response to questions 17 to 19 (and related comments)

Schools may provide a general response; however, where Examiners raise specific points these must be addressed individually:

The Progression and Awards Process

Response to questions 20-35 (and related comments)

Schools may provide a general response; however, where Examiners raise specific points these must be addressed individually:

Other comments

Response to items included in the 'Other Comments' section of the report

Many thanks for your positive comments and we look forward to working with you again this academic year.