

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>Neuroscience</i>
Programme(s) / Module(s):	BSc Neuroscience, BSc Neuroscience in Relation to Medicine, MBiol, BSc (Integrated Masters) Neuroscience
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	BSc MBiol

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.

Enhancements made from the previous year

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

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

For Examiners in the first year of appointment

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

For Examiners completing their term of appointment

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

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
9.	Does the programme structure allow the programme aims and intended learning outcomes to be met?	Y
10.	Are the programme aims and intended learning outcomes commensurate with the level of award?	Y
11.	Did the Aims and ILOs meet the expectations of the national subject benchmark (where relevant)?	Y
12.	Is the programme(s) comparable with similar programmes at other institutions?	Y
<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
<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?	N
<i>Please comment on the appropriateness of the programme as training for a PhD:</i>		
15.	Does the programme include clinical practice components?	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)?	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.</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
<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:</i>		

Please use this box to provide any additional comments you would like to make in relation to assessment and feedback:

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

This is my third year of examining for the Neuroscience programmes and I continue to be impressed by the quality of the education, the attainment of the students and the motivation of the academic staff to continue to look for ways of further improvement. I visited twice this year, once in spring primarily to have the opportunity to meet with the students and later in June for the exam board. Both of these visits were well organised by the administrative staff and I am grateful to them for their expert assistance which greatly facilitates my task as external. In my role I am also asked to look at students on a degree classification borderline to ensure your algorithm for assigning the final degree classification is fit and fair.

During my spring visit 2017 I was interested to see if any of the issues that were raised by the students last year resurfaced again. Topics that they had previously raised included the uneven provision of pastoral support which could be dependent on the level of engagement of the individual personal tutors, the lack of choice of neuroscience modules and the balance of workload for students taking different combinations of modules. This year there was a really good representation of students

across the years including a couple of Masters students, about 15 students altogether. We discussed their induction, transition between years, programme content, module choices, overlap and synergy between modules, project allocation, lecture delivery and recordings, assessment, feedback, personal support, opportunities for further laboratory experience and careers. The comments were resoundingly positive. A few points that are worth reporting is that they are excited by the introduction of a new module in cognitive neuroscience. They clearly appreciate this extension to the programme content. The Masters students commented on the rather heavy workload in semester 1 and it might be worthwhile looking into this to check the expectations for this new course are realistic. Across the board they appreciated the speed with which they receive the marks and feedback for their work although some commented that they felt that this might be at the expense of receiving more detailed feedback which they viewed as a negative aspect of this time-limited system.

This year I have viewed a range of Semester 1 modules for the distribution of marks, the quality of scripts and markers comments and feedback. I found that some modules had a relatively high proportion of first class marks:
BMSC 314401 Advanced Topics in Neuroscience. I noted that there were 20% firsts compared to 5% last year and I looked carefully at some of the essays attracting first class marks. This allayed concerns over grade inflation as the quality of the work I looked at was deserving of the awarded mark. BMSC3101 Inherited Disorders. The overall proportion of firsts was 40%.
BMSC 3126 Integrative Biomedical Sciences. This module is assessed by coursework only and 75% of the students achieved first class marks. Interestingly this percentage was decreased compared to previous years and it would seem this might be a result of the introduction of a more rigorous assessment encompassing a debate, abstract, essay. BMSC3138 Cellular Cardiology. This module was assessed by a detailed and challenging examination paper and the 25% of students that obtained firsts were well deserved. For BMS3139 Systems Neurophysiology I noted that there were some students failing this module which is rather unusual for your cohort who are generally strong students. Overall, in terms of distribution of marks it would seem there is a tendency for an increased proportion of firsts over the last three years. I also looked at BMSC314001 Advanced Scientific Skills in Neuroscience which includes some excellent assessments of key skills based around quantitative pharmacology and also requires the students to write an abstract.

More generally, I found that the examiners' comments on the scripts were mostly informative and sometimes quite extensive but still variable. I am impressed by the range of approaches that are deployed to establish a breadth of skills in individual student. I particularly appreciated some of the details of assessment e.g. the reflective statement that each student has to provide at the conclusion of their laboratory research project. This develops aspects of personal progression in an innovative way. I also note the breadth of projects that the students have the opportunity to pursue, something they also commented on very positively when I met with them. I was pleased to see that the examiner's recommendation that projects should be annotated by the markers has been implemented. This facilitates the role of the external, but also should provide helpful feedback for the students. In terms of the project marking, I found there was a thorough justification of marks against the criteria of assessment for each project and I am satisfied that the process of moderation when the two independent markers have a differing view is robust and fair. However, this process of moderation is only triggered if the two independent markers differ by 10% or more and I would like to suggest that the exam board consider narrowing this margin. As the situation currently stands a project may have two marks that differ by nearly a whole degree classification and the student's work will not be moderated, rather they will be awarded the average of the two marks. The project is such a large component and major determinant of their overall degree classification I would argue that the decision should not be made by a spreadsheet- the markers should reach a consensus.

I was asked to look at one borderline student who was subject to the algorithm to decide degree classification. I am satisfied that the procedures are transparent, fair and they were rigorously implemented. The processes seem to work very well. In particular I like the flexibility that the exam board have in how the algorithm is applied which is academically sound and fair to the student. However, I noted again, as I commented in last year's report, that a student with an excellent first class profile in the third year was awarded an upper second as their second year mark brought their overall degree classification down (the second and third year average differed by 12%). Yet again this was a student who had taken a year out in industry and had obviously benefitted enormously from the experience. It is rather a pity that there cannot be some element of 'exit velocity' in the algorithm.

Name of School and Head of School (or nominee)

Title and Name of Responder:	
Position*:	Programme Leader for Neuroscience
Faculty / School of:	<i>Biomedical Sciences</i>
Address for communication:	School of Biomedical Sciences Faculty of Biological Sciences
Email:	
Telephone:	

*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 qat@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

n/a

Response to Enhancements made from the previous year

n/a

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:

n/a

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:

There appear to be no issues associated with these questions.

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:

There appear to be no issues associated with these questions.

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:

There appear to be no issues associated with these questions.

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:

There appear to be no issues associated with these questions.

Other comments

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

Many thanks to the external examiner for careful and rigorous assessment of the Neuroscience degree programme. compliments regarding the programme are much appreciated and valued by the academic and administrative staff.

The issue of detailed feedback versus a swift turn-around of marks is always a concern but reflects the time and resource pressures common to all academics. We endeavour to provide the best possible feedback to students within the constraints of a University-wide requirement for all feedback on assessed course work to be returned to within 15 working days.

Regarding the proportion of first class marks in a variety of modules, this is something of which we are aware. We are confident that our marking is as rigorous as it has been in the past and as the examiner noted, those students awarded first class marks fully deserved them. Possible reasons for students getting better marks are; (i) raising our A-level offers to AAB, (ii) more students undertaking industrial placements, and (iii) clearer and more transparent marking criteria that are provided to both staff and students.

With regard to the high proportion of first class marks obtained for BMSC3126 Integrative Biomedical Sciences, this module has limited space and is designed specifically for students who wish to have a career as laboratory scientists. Competition for places is fierce and as a consequence only highly motivated and high achieving students are successful in obtaining places on the module.

BMSC3139 Systems Neurophysiology: this module was failed by six of the 58 students enrolled on the module; however, three of these had appeals for special circumstances/consideration granted and were given the opportunity to resit the exam as a first attempt in August. The remaining three students included an Erasmus student and two students who have struggled to pass modules at the first attempt throughout their university career.

We are pleased that the innovative approach to some of our assessments is appreciated and we continue to strive to give consistent and informative feedback to students whenever possible. Regarding 10% moderation margin on project marks, this is an ongoing discussion and would need to be approved at Faculty level given that our Code of Practice on Assessment is Faculty-wide. We will forward your comments to the Faculty Assessment and Standards Group which oversees our Code of Practice on Assessment for consideration. We have this year, introduced some changes to the way in which the marks are justified and agreed when outside of the 10% margin, and so we are pleased to see that this has been noted in your comments, 'I found there was a thorough justification of marks against the criteria of assessment for each project and I am satisfied that the process of moderation when the two independent markers have a differing view is robust and fair'.

In terms of exit velocity – the University operates a classification system of 1:1 or 1:2 (years 2:3) with the ratio being applied that provides the students with the highest mark. This allows to some extent the exit velocity to be taken into account.

Finally, we would like to thank the external examiner again for her insightful comments and hard work in assessing the Neuroscience degree programme.