

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):	Ecology, Zoology (and programme variants)
Programme(s) / Module(s):	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
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.

Overall, I feel that students on the courses I examined are stretched and rigorously assessed (although assessment methods could be more diverse, see below), leading to an excellent student experience. This is also shown in the quality of the work that I examined, including coursework and final year projects. I'd like to thank the Examinations Officer for prompt feedback to the comments I made to draft exam scripts over the past year.

I am pleased that students get to see their exam scripts during 'open days' that are well attended (especially after semester 1 at stage 2). This appears to be an excellent way of ensuring that the feedback/annotation written in exam scripts is understood by students so they can improve. For this to be a success, it needs to be attended by all module leaders so that specific questions can be directed to them. I recommend developing the format of these open days further around topics such as 'how to succeed in exams' or 'using script feedback to improve exam results'. Why not release the model answers to students too? This will be most beneficial to students who score poorly on some questions.

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 second year as External Examiner and it is encouraging to see some improvements from last year, in particular the move to standardise exam assessments across modules. I acknowledge some reluctance by a small number of module leaders to the standardisation of MCQs and exam question types. However, it should be noted that such lack of consistency is noticed by students and this has been communicated to me during both my meetings with them to date.

This year I spent more time scrutinising level-2 exam scripts and coursework as I ran out of time to do this thoroughly last year. Although I am generally satisfied with the quality of teaching and assessment at this level, I am not convinced that module teaching teams are yet using the full range of marks available to them in the marking criteria (which may help to explain why the vast majority of 3-year Zoology students received a 2:1 this year). See comments below.

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 final year projects where marks differed between first and second markers, I found numerous examples of projects where the justification for agreed marks was lacking. Thus it was unclear to me how markers that initially differed by up to 25% finally agreed on a mark using the marking criteria. This leaves an incomplete audit trail and would be problematic for the University during any subsequent appeal. Unless the forms designed for this process

are implemented consistently across the degree programmes next year, I will not be able to sign-off the agreed marks before the Exam Board.

For Examiners in the first year of appointment

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

For Examiners completing their term of appointment

4.	Have you observed improvements in the programme(s) over the period of your appointment?	Y / N
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

Please use this box to explain your overall impression of the programme structure, design, aims and intended learning outcomes.

The programme structures, design, aims and intended learning outcomes are excellent. I acknowledge that some academics do very well with the limited resources they have to manage large class sizes in some modules, although clearly it is preferable to have smaller classes in the 2nd and 3rd year. However, I feel there are further opportunities to diversify assessment types, including a greater emphasis on problem solving (see below).

13.	Is the influence of research on the curriculum and learning and teaching clear?	Y / N
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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)

The students acknowledge that the teaching is, on the whole, research-led. The research projects were of a generally high standard and aligned with the research interests of academics. Within individual modules academics could be encouraged to not only teach the current 'paradigm', but perhaps make it explicit how their research contributes or even challenges this. This would potentially encourage more critical thinking.

14.	Does the programme form part of an Integrated PhD?	Y / N
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Please comment on the appropriateness of the programme as training for a PhD:

15.	Does the programme include clinical practice components?	Y / N
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Please comment on the learning and assessment of practice components of the curriculum here:

16.	Is the programme accredited by a Professional or Statutory Regulatory Body (PSRB)?	Y / N
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Please comment on the value of, and the programme's ability to meet, PSRB requirements here:

These programmes are accredited by the Royal Society of Biology. Advanced degree accreditation by the Society recognises academic excellence in the biosciences, and highlights degrees that educate the research and development leaders of the future. The advanced accreditation criteria require evidence that graduates from the programme meet defined sets of learning outcomes, including gaining a substantial period of research experience.

Assessment and Feedback

17.	Does the programme design clearly align intended learning outcomes with assessment?	Y / N
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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.

Considering stages 2 and 3 combined, there are considerable opportunities to diversify assessment types and I recommend a greater focus on problem solving assessments. Although I acknowledge this may not be possible for modules with very high student numbers, there is scope for students to get to grips with contemporary issues in ecology, zoology and conservation and to try to find solutions to some complex problems. This might be particularly useful for modules that are currently assessed entirely by exams (e.g. BLGY3241, BLGY3242 etc.)

The research projects were of a generally high standard. However, where marks differed between first and second markers I found numerous examples of projects where the justification for agreed marks was lacking. Thus it was unclear to me how markers that initially differed by up to 25% finally agreed on a mark. The forms designed for this process needs to be implemented consistently across the degree programmes.

18.	Is the design and structure of the assessment methods appropriate to the level of award?	Y / N
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19.	Were students given adequate opportunity to demonstrate their achievement of the programme aims and intended learning outcomes?	Y / N
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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 students on the courses that I assessed are stretched and rigorously assessed, leading to an excellent student experience. I note that there is a general dip in exam grades in stage 2 from stage 1, presumably because stage 1 is almost exclusively MCQs whereas stage 2 is mostly essay based. I suggest either increasing the number of exam essays in stage 1 or providing some tutorials to stage 2 students in semester 1 on writing good essay answers under exam conditions.

Although I am generally satisfied with the average marks for each module, I noticed that BLGY2192 (Experimental Design & Analysis) jumped by 10% compared to previous years to 73.4%. Given how important this module is for final year projects and subsequent research I recommend that it is scrutinised (I understand there is a new module leader).

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

This year I spent more time scrutinising level-2 exam scripts and coursework. I am not convinced that module teaching teams are yet using the full range of marks available to them in the marking criteria (which may explain why the vast majority of 3-year Zoology students received a 2:1 this year). For example, I found some examples of annotation in exam scripts that said "perfect answer" yet the student was only awarded 80%. What more must students do to get a higher mark? I also found examples of graphs in coursework receiving 8 out of 10 but no indication of what the student did wrong to drop 2 marks. I would encourage greater scrutiny of marking consistency during Moderation with feedback given to module leaders where they excel in annotation, aligned to the marking criteria, or could do better.

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 / N
21.	Was the progression and award guidance provided sufficient for you to act effectively as an External Examiner?	Y / N
22.	Did you receive appropriate programme documentation for your area(s) of responsibility?	Y / N
23.	Did you receive appropriate module documentation for your area(s) of responsibility?	Y / N
24.	Did you receive full details of marking criteria applicable to your area(s) of responsibility?	Y / N
25.	Were you provided with all draft examination papers/assessments?	Y / N
26.	Was the nature and level of the assessment questions appropriate?	Y / N
27.	Were suitable arrangements made to consider your comments on assessment questions?	Y / N
28.	Was sufficient assessed work made available to enable you to have confidence in your evaluation of the standard of student work?	Y / N
29.	Were the examination scripts clearly marked/annotated?	Y / N
30.	Was the choice of subjects for final year projects and/or dissertations appropriate?	Y / N
31.	Was the method and standard of assessment appropriate for the final year projects and/or dissertations?	Y / N
32.	Were the administrative arrangements satisfactory for the whole process, including the operation of the Progression and Awards Board?	Y / N
33.	Were you able to attend the Progression and Awards Board meeting?	Y / N
34.	Were you satisfied with the recommendations of the Progression and Awards Board?	Y / N
35.	Were you satisfied with the way decisions from the School Special Circumstances meeting were communicated to the Progression and Awards Board?	Y / N
<p><i>Please use this box to provide any additional comments you would like to make on the questions above:</i></p> <p>Regarding Q35, it is not entirely clear to me how decisions from the School Special Circumstances meeting are used in the Progression and Awards Board.</p>		

Other comments

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

The External Examiners had to work harder this year to get the information they needed, in particular the module packs which did not include exam scripts and model answers. For some of the modules that I assessed, summary statistics were missing making it hard for me to compare average scores across years. Although scripts and (some) coursework was made available on a USB stick, it would be appreciated if hard copies were provided in the module packs. Office staff did a fantastic job in providing information when I requested it (including a laptop so I could access the VLE), but it would better not to have to ask for this next year.

I found inconsistencies on some of the VLE module information. For example, BLGY2293 module information states a 1.5 hour exam, but the actual exam was two hours. Module information for BLGY2144 was missing.

The Conservation Biology module (BLGY3241) needs to be refreshed to include socio-economics, beliefs and values, conflicts, human well-being and other concepts that are central to 21st century conservation. This is an ideal module for developing some of the problem solving assessments described earlier. However I understand that this module is going to be replaced with a new one that reflects the wider expertise of new academics to the Faculty.

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:

**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

Students are stretched and rigorously assessed leading to an excellent student experience. We thank the external examiner for these positive and supportive comments.

Assessment methods could be more diverse. Please see response below (17-19).

Pleased that students see their exam scripts. This appears to be an excellent way of ensuring that the feedback/annotation written in exam scripts is understood by students so they can improve. I recommend developing the format of these open days further around topics such as 'how to succeed in exams' or 'using script feedback to improve exam results'.

We thank the external examiner for this helpful suggestion. By re-branding the exam script surgery as 'using script feedback to improve exam results', we could improve attendance and motivate students to use the feedback appropriately. We will consult with the DSE about broadening this to other programmes in the School.

Why not release the model answers to students too?

Model answers are a broad guide to the potential material that could be included bearing in mind that students should be including evidence of their own further reading. Hence we think that practice with model questions/answers before exams might be more informative. In many modules example questions and answers are available on the VLE, which students are encouraged strongly to view and practice. We think this is preferable to releasing the model answers after the exam. We can make this a more common practice across modules.

Response to Enhancements made from the previous year

It is encouraging to see some improvements from last year, in particular the move to standardise exam assessments across modules. I acknowledge some reluctance by a small number of module leaders to the standardisation of MCQs and exam question types. Such lack of consistency is noticed by students and this has been communicated to me during my meetings with them.

We will continue to encourage staff to use the standard exam rubric as introduced by the DSE last year. Discrepancies may arise if different modules have variable amounts of coursework vs exam assessments because exam lengths may be reduced if the coursework component is high.

I am not convinced that module teaching teams are yet using the full range of marks available to them in the marking criteria (which may help to explain why the vast majority of 3-year Zoology students received a 2:1 this year). See comments below.

Please see response below (17-19).

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:

For final year projects where marks differed between first and second markers, I found numerous examples of projects where the justification for agreed marks was lacking. Thus it was unclear to me how markers that initially differed by up to 25% finally agreed on a mark using the marking criteria. This leaves an incomplete audit trail and would be problematic for the University during any subsequent appeal. Unless the forms designed for this process are implemented consistently across the degree programmes next year, I will not be able to sign-off the agreed marks before the Exam Board.

We agree with the external examiner that we need to have a more rigorous and transparent response to project mark discrepancies, which needs to have a clear paper trail of mark reconciliation. This is actually common practice for Masters projects and was implemented 2016-17 academic session for the undergraduate projects. We will work with the DSE to implement this more rigorously for 2017-18.

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:

N/A

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:

The programme structures, design, aims and intended learning outcomes are excellent. I acknowledge that some academics do very well with the limited resources they have to manage large class sizes in some modules, although clearly it is preferable to have smaller classes in the 2nd and 3rd year.

We thank the external examiner for these supportive comments. We agree that Level 3 Advanced Topics modules in the ecology and zoology programmes have class sizes that are very large.

I feel there are further opportunities to diversify assessment types, including a greater emphasis on problem solving (see below).

Please see response below (17-19).

Within individual modules academics could be encouraged to not only teach the current 'paradigm', but perhaps make it explicit how their research contributes or even challenges this. This would potentially encourage more critical thinking.

We think that with the strong focus on our teaching being research-led, within the framework of how research contributes to current paradigms, we are encouraging students to think critically. This is encouraged strongly in the academic tutorial modules and especially in the re-vamped Advanced Topics modules at Level 3. In these AT modules in which students are introduced to current areas of research (which includes examples from our own research labs), and are encouraged to evaluate the research critically; the range of assessment types now employed mean that student critical thinking is a key aspect.

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 are considerable opportunities to diversify assessment types and I recommend a greater focus on problem solving assessments. Although I acknowledge this may not be possible for modules with very high student numbers, there is scope for students to get to grips with contemporary issues in ecology, zoology and conservation and to try to find solutions to some complex problems. The Conservation Biology module (BLGY3241) needs to be refreshed to include socio-economics, beliefs and values, conflicts, human well-being and other concepts that are central to 21st century conservation. This is an ideal module for developing some of the problem solving assessments described earlier.

As part of an extensive re-vamping of the Advanced Topics (AT) modules at Level 3, the modules assessed only by exam have been removed or re-designed (AT in Zoology discontinued, staff now teach in other AT modules; Conservation Biology discontinued, re-designed as 20cr Advanced Topics in Conservation Science). Despite the very high student numbers on the ecology/zoology AT modules, we believe we have managed to incorporate a wide range of assessment types across the full complement of modules. For example, for Advanced Topics in Conservation Science, the content, teaching approaches and assessments have all been re-designed and refreshed. As well as maintaining an exam component, assessments also comprise a group-based podcast and a computer-based problem solving practical class that introduces environmental decision science and conservation planning. The AT Animal Behaviour module also includes problem solving in the form of a student-designed

practical lab (designed by the group, individual write up and analysis), student seminars on current topics, as well as an examination.

There is a general dip in exam grades in stage 2 from stage 1, presumably because stage 1 is almost exclusively MCQs whereas stage 2 is mostly essay based. I suggest either increasing the number of exam essays in stage 1 or providing some tutorials to stage 2 students in semester 1 on writing good essay answers under exam conditions.

Exam essay writing is a component of the academic tutorials and increasingly model questions and answers are available online for students to access.

Although I am generally satisfied with the average marks for each module, I noticed that BLGY2192 (Experimental Design & Analysis) jumped by 10% compared to previous years to 73.4%. Given how important this module is for final year projects and subsequent research I recommend that it is scrutinised.

The DSE, Exams Officer and module manager examined this and found no obvious systemic problem with the module, but it is something we will look at again this year.

I am not convinced that module teaching teams are yet using the full range of marks available to them in the marking criteria (which may explain why the vast majority of 3-year Zoology students received a 2:1 this year). I would encourage greater scrutiny of marking consistency during Moderation with feedback given to module leaders where they excel in annotation, aligned to the marking criteria, or could do better.

We will continue to ask markers to make full use of other marking criteria and to evidence the mark awarded with the appropriate comments. The DSE has introduced a process for informing markers if annotation are insufficient. One possible explanation for why more Level 3 students are not attaining First class degrees is because they are not providing evidence of further reading beyond the lecture material. This is necessary for First class marks and stipulated in the marking criteria.

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:

Regarding Q35, it is not entirely clear to me how decisions from the School Special Circumstances meeting are used in the Progression and Awards Board.

Following a confidential meeting with the SC chair and two other academic staff members, and in line with standard practice in the Faculty, the recommendations and/or decisions are communicated at the next internal exam board. Progression/award issues are for the most part dealt with by the internal exam board or passed to the external examiners for consideration.

Other comments

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

The External Examiners had to work harder this year to get the information they needed, in particular the module packs which did not include exam scripts and model answers. For some of the modules that I assessed, summary statistics were missing making it hard for me to compare average scores across years. Although scripts and (some) coursework was made available on a USB stick, it would be appreciated if hard copies were provided in the module packs. Office staff did a fantastic job in providing information when I requested it (including a laptop so I could access the VLE), but it would better not to have to ask for this next year.

We thank the external examiner for bringing this to our attention and we apologise for making the task more difficult. The student education office has been experiencing staff shortages for various reasons and this may have contributed to the situation.

I found inconsistencies on some of the VLE module information. For example, BLGY2293 module information states a 1.5 hour exam, but the actual exam was two hours. Module information for BLGY2144 was missing.

Module managers and student education staff will work more closely and earlier in the academic cycle in order to address the inconsistencies that still remain.

The Conservation Biology module (BLGY3241) needs to be refreshed to include socio-economics, beliefs and values, conflicts, human well-being and other concepts that are central to 21st century conservation. This is an ideal module for developing some of the problem solving assessments described earlier. However I understand that this module is going to be replaced with a new one that reflects the wider expertise of new academics to the Faculty.

Please see response above (17-19).