

The University of Leeds
EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2017-18 QAT Received 26/07/2018

Part A: General Information

Subject area and awards being examined

Title and Name of Examiner:

| | |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| <i>Faculty / School of:</i> | Faculty of Life Sciences |
| <i>Subject(s):</i> | |
| <i>Programme(s) / Module(s):</i> | Biochemistry |
| <i>Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):</i> | 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.
The Leeds Biochemistry courses are framed around a solid scaffold of strong basic scientific knowledge that is taught in an appropriate and authoritative manner. There is no doubt that this is a challenging but fair course that progresses steadily through the years, producing students who have an extremely good grasp of the subject matter and who can apply their knowledge in a meaningful fashion. I still rate this course as one of the best in country – if not the best. What makes the course special is that the teaching integrates the research of the department's academics extremely well, such that in the final year students learn about research not only through project work but also in the advanced topics modules. Coupled with this is a strong emphasis on techniques, not only their application but also on the theory underpinning the approach. This combination gives rise to extremely well-rounded students who not only learn detail on the subject but also gain insight into how such processes are discovered.

As with last year, I thought the examination papers contained a broad range of excellent questions that tested the knowledge of the students both fairly and proportionally. The scripts were extremely well marked and annotated clearly to help highlight both the good and the bad. The marking was very fair.

I would add that this course works well through good continuity between the years – and is also heavily reliant on good teaching. The convenors need to keep a close eye on the courses to ensure that high standards are maintained, since failure to encourage these standards could be catastrophic. See comments below.

Enhancements made from the previous year

Please highlight any enhancements made to the programme(s) or processes over the past year in this box.
I have not noted any enhancements from last year.

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
I met with 4 students in March – all but one who were very critical of elements of the course. One of these was a first year student who felt that the first year was too tough and that not enough help was provided – indeed, I believe that this student was taking a grievance against the University. mentioned that in 1303, was effectively self-taught – and that answers for some of the tests/practicals were passed down from one year to the

next. felt that orientation paper would have helped start more smoothly. Two other students were in their 4th year, having returned from a year in industry. They found it extremely difficult to integrate back into the University, and were left off important email lists. They got the feeling that nobody wanted to know – and that nobody was there to help them. The list of complaints went on – they felt it would be useful for them to see examples of good lab reports or sample essays. There was a lack of choice with the discovery module in the final year. For the ATUs – they wanted to have an element of course work and shorter exams. They also felt that some kind of department-associated social media would be useful. The final student in the group was a course rep, who did well to help defend the Department – and was extremely positive about the experience. felt that the hard first year prepared students well for the second and third years. So, my recommendation here is for the various course organisers to review their courses and ensure that they are happy both with the content and delivery of the courses, and that those responsible ensure that students are better integrated into the University upon their return from a year out. I would encourage all those linked with course delivery, from lecturers to PhD students and technicians in labs – to show a high level of enthusiasm.

I think that better use could be made of the March meeting for the external examiner. I think having greater access to more students to gain better and more proportionate feedback would be helpful. It was suggested that I could visit whilst the students were doing their project vivas – to speak with them afterwards in a more relaxed atmosphere to gain more insights into their course. I would make this a strong recommendation.

It is clear that a number of changes have taken place to the courses over the past year – with new lecturers coming in and new course convenors. There is some evidence that some courses seem to be a bit weaker on the examination scores – so the academics in charge of all courses need to pay careful attention to ensure they are delivering the best possible course, especially if they have new personnel giving lectures. Certainly, there is room to improve coordination between module convenors, course coordinators and the administration office. I know that this year the strikes did not help in the preparation of material, but we were given short notice to return examination papers and many questions did not have outline answers.

In some cases, especially with project marks, we observed that the totals were not added appropriately. Also, in a number of cases, projects were being marked on quite different proformas, with different weightings for the various sections. This led to a lot of confusion at the examination board – and it is probably fair to say that I have never experienced anything like this during all of my time as an experienced examiner. Most of the problems I believe are down to changes in staff and new people taking on roles for which they had not been previously mentored. I strongly recommend that actions are put in place to help coordinate actions between the administration office and academics – to ensure that each know their responsibilities. (It should be stated that once problems were identified – both the office staff and the academics worked extremely hard and efficiently to correct the problems).

Finally, for the examiners visit in the summer, could I suggest that each examiner be given a separate (lockable) room. This would make conversations with course organisers simpler and allow us less disturbance during this busy period as we review the various scripts and project reports.

For Examiners in the first year of appointment

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

For Examiners completing their term of appointment

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|----|---|-------|
| 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 an 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 |
| 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 - better |
| <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. There is a combination of practical work, course work and end of term examinations. These are used sensibly to provide continued and integrated learning across the years.</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: Knowledge of the students seems very high and they have learnt from first principles – and applied these appropriately. The students have an excellent grasp of theory, knowledge and experimental experience.</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 Examiner's 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 |
| <p><i>Please use this box to provide any additional comments you would like to make on the questions above:</i></p> | | |

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 Examiner:

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|-------------------------------|--|
| Subject(s): | <i>Biochemistry/Medical Biochemistry</i> |
| Programme(s) / Module(s): | BSc, MBIol Biochemistry BSc, MBIol Medical Biochemistry BSc Biochemistry in Relation to Medicine |
| Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc): | BSc/MBiol |

Title and Name of Responder:

| | |
|----------------------------|--|
| Position*: | Programme Leader |
| Faculty / School of: | <i>Biological Sciences, Molecular and Cellular Biology</i> |
| 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

We thank _____ for very positive comment about our course. Reflecting the steady change in staff research interests we have introduced two new ATU topics for 2018/19 that will be of relevance to Biochemistry students: the role of lipids in membrane protein function and the use of antibodies are therapeutics. Additionally, BIOC3303 (level 3 skills module that focusses on modern biochemical structural techniques) has been modified/refreshed by the new module manager, _____ – an internationally renowned mass spectrometrists, maintaining our research-led teaching.

Response to Enhancements made from the previous year

No actions identified here but see above for enhancements in plan for 2018-19 academic session.

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:

We are disappointed that three of the four students who met with _____ described negative experiences with the programme. While this may simply be due to the small number of students who met the external examiner (see later), we have addressed the points raised.

1. Level 1 'too hard': the course is designed to be challenging in all years. As some students have not practised their maths skills over their A-levels, this aspect can be daunting especially in the first semester. It should be emphasised that at the end of the year, few people fail the module aimed to improve the student's problem solving/data handling ability (3/81, average mark = 65.3%). Nonetheless, to allay student worries in semester 1, we have revamped online resources for maths/lab calculations revision and will now run 2 drop-in workshops in wk 5 for those students who feel they are struggling. Students can also engage in the PASS scheme open to all Year 1 students for peer-assisted support should they wish to.
2. Integration of industrial year students: a meeting has been timetabled for all students who are returning from year abroad / industry with the PL to welcome them back to Leeds. We have also discussed with the administration team to ensure there is no problems with email distribution lists etc.

3. Request for ATU coursework: ATUs comprise 60/120C in the final year. While there is no coursework for these modules, the other 60C have a high component of coursework, giving a good balance of assessment methods across the year as a whole.

4. March meeting: in an effort to meet many more students (to gain a balanced view of the course) it is suggested that this visit coincides with final year project vivas. We are aiming to implement this suggestion for 2018-19.

5. Delivery of the course: the School lost several staff members key to Biochemistry teaching provision and administration. We have appointed two experienced members of staff to two BIOC modules and biannual programme meetings are now held. The changes described above have all been made in discussion with the administrative staff.

6. We are aware that some errors were identified in assessments this year, which we very much regret. Programme Leaders, the Examinations Officer and the Director of Student Education have met to discuss how these issues arose; recent turnover of staff, and changes to academic responsibilities has meant that we have a new DSE and Exams Officer and a completely new programme administration team this year, which may have contributed to less effective processes than in previous years. This meeting resulted in a number of actions, and we are currently instigating changes to prevent a repetition of the errors identified. We have clarified our standard operating procedures, produced extensive checklists for managing the administrative side of the exam process and will ensure that administrative staff are fully trained, and supported during assessment periods, and that checking of processes is returned to previous levels of accuracy.

7. Following comments made by all our External Examiners this year, we will provide a larger lockable space for the duration of the External Examiners' visit, and provide printed, rather than electronic versions of key documents.

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:

None required

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:

We thank the examiner for his support for our programme

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:

Some of the perceived difficulties of the course in level 1 probably arise due to our desire to provide a rigorous course. As mentioned by _____, our level 3 student rep recognised that the preparation in level 1 made levels 2 and 3 easier.

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:

No response required

Other comments

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

