

The University of Leeds
EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2017-18

QAT Received 31/07/2018

Part A: General Information

Subject area and awards being examined

Title and Name of Examiner:

<i>Faculty / School of:</i>	School of Molecular and Cellular Biology
<i>Subject(s):</i>	Biological Sciences
<i>Programme(s) / Module(s):</i>	BSc/MBiol Biological Sciences BSc/MBiol Biological Sciences (Biotechnology with Enterprise) BSc Cell Biology of Human Disease
<i>Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):</i>	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.
In terms of employability, inclusion in the programme of a job application exercise in which students are required to identify a job or study opportunity that they wish to apply to, prepare a CV and suitable cover letter, and do background analysis on the organisation/business, is an excellent way to enhance students' preparation for future job or study applications. My meeting with students also revealed that they have a good awareness of employability issues. They mentioned the Faculty lead for employability and indicated that they felt they were kept well informed about placements and other opportunities.

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 am not aware of any.

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 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?	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
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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

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

My overall impression is that the structures and designs of the programmes are very good, each offering students an interesting, varied and challenging programme of study.

The aims and intended learning outcomes are appropriate for such programmes and commensurate with the degrees awarded.

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

It is very clear that the curriculum is informed by research ongoing in the School. The ATU components in particular offer exposure to a variety of cutting edge research elements. The third year projects also allow students to undertake authentic research. This is a very positive aspect of the programmes.

14.	Does the programme form part of an Integrated PhD?	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?	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)?	N
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Please comment on the value of, and the programme's ability to meet, PSRB requirements here:
I have not discussed this aspect at any length with the programme team as yet.

Assessment and Feedback

17.	Does the programme design clearly align intended learning outcomes with assessment?	Y
<p><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></p> <p>The design and structure of the various assessment methods appear appropriate. The range of assessment types allow for suitable assessment of various types of learning outcomes, both in terms of knowledge and skills. The arrangements for marking modules generally seem to operate adequately, although I noted some examples where it seemed that collation and summing of marks from a number of different markers within the same assessment was likely to be time-consuming and introduce considerable opportunity for error (e.g. in the BIOL 2111 exam scripts, an answer booklet was marked by around 6 different markers, on paper). There could be major gains in terms of accuracy of mark summation and administration time if such an exam moved to online assessment. In looking over a range of scripts, I saw a range of student performance suggesting that the assessments are functioning well in terms of enabling differentiation between those students who are performing well and those who are performing less well.</p>		
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:</i></p> <p>Generally I found the standard of student performance to be very good, and certainly comparable to that encountered at other Institutions (home institution and others where I have acted as external examiner).</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> <p>Despite having been formally 'checked off', there were examples of project mark sheets where the individual marks allocated against different criteria had been incorrectly added up by the marker. There need to be better checks in place to ensure that this does not happen going forward.</p> <p>Another worrying example, which was identified by external examiners on the day of the Awards Board, was that project proposals for MBiol projects had not been consistently marked, due to some markers using outdated versions of the marking sheet which allocated different percentage weightings to criteria than the current version. In order to prevent such errors, one suggestion would be to have a central online repository which held the correct version of all marksheets, which could be accessed by staff and also visible to students.</p> <p>In order to gain a clearer view of assessment and feedback across the programme, I would recommend undertaking TESTA (Transforming the Experience of Students through Assessment) analysis. Details can be found at https://www.testa.ac.uk/. This can identify over- or under-assessment, clustering of marking, feedback volume, and student views, and is a very helpful tool.</p> <p>Given that students can choose different themes in the Biological Sciences degree, it would be useful to analyse whether there are any inconsistencies in attainment between the different modules contributing to the different themes. One way to do this would be by plotting, for each module, on the same plot the mark gained by each student in that module and on the same vertical the average that that student gained across all other modules in the year. This makes it easy to look for any major discrepancies (which would signal either an overly lenient module or one which is marked too stringently). We have used such an approach successfully to identify outlier modules and I would be happy to provide further information.</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?	N

23.	Did you receive appropriate module documentation for your area(s) of responsibility?	N
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?	N
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?	N
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?	N
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?	N
35.	Were you satisfied with the way decisions from the School Special Circumstances meeting were communicated to the Progression and Awards Board?	N

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

Regarding questions 22 and 23: As a new external examiner it would have been really helpful to have had more general information about the organisation of the course and its components. This was compounded by difficulties in getting set up to log in remotely to the University of Leeds computer systems: it required rather lengthy telephone calls to the Leeds IT staff to finalise access. When I visited in March and asked for information to help get me orientated, I received a copy of the presentation given to applicants on Visit Day. This was OK as far as it went, but it would have been much better to have had some form of 'organogram' as suggested by the previous external examiner in last year's report. On my second visit in June, I was still finding it hard to become familiar with all of the modules, and had to request a list of the modules and their credit weightings. It would have been more efficient if this sort of information was provided as a matter of course.

Regarding question 27: I answered No here because in November I was asked to provide comments on semester 1 examination papers within 3 days. Fortunately this very short notice was later extended to 8 days, but a longer turnaround time would be the normal expectation.

Regarding question 29: Exam scripts were well annotated and I commend the markers for that. However, I noted that the commentary on Projects was quite variable in terms of length and quality – I saw examples of just a couple of bullet points which didn't really provide adequate justification for the mark awarded. I appreciate that it is difficult to get all markers to conform to the desired level of commentary, but it might be useful to circulate anonymised good and bad examples to markers so that they all have a clear idea of expectations.

Regarding question 32 and 34: There are two main issues here that I would like to raise. The first is that I was incredulous to discover that the Awards Board is not conducted in such a way as to allow degrees to be classified anonymously. This practice seems many years behind the norm in the sector, and I would recommend that efforts are made to change arrangements to allow anonymous classification without delay. Unless it does so, the Department will remain open to criticisms of bias and unfairness, particularly since members of the Awards Board know individual students well, having interacted with them for extended periods of time during their projects, and hence may be challenged to remain entirely objective.

The second issue relates to the fact that having signed off the classifications agreed at the Exam Board as soon as it finished, I was dismayed to receive a number of emails over the next two weeks or so asking me to sign off on student outcomes that required changing for a variety of reasons (e.g. incorrect weightings used in spreadsheets, incomplete checks on eligibility for award). Hence it is difficult to feel fully satisfied with the recommendations of the Awards Board. Improvements to administrative arrangements are required such that the information presented at the Awards Board is definitive.

Regarding question 35: In order to provide clearer guidance to the Awards Board, recommendations from the School Special Circumstances committee should include an indication of the level of support e.g. whether this relates to mild, significant or severe circumstances. In the absence of such guidance, the tendency perhaps is to err on the side of generosity which may mean that students who have experienced only mild circumstances are being given greater allowance than is warranted.

Other comments

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

Some adjustments to external examiner (EE) visits would help make these more effective and efficient for all concerned:

- a) a larger, lockable room for use by the EE where scripts for the different modules/assessments could be laid out in advance. This would enable EE to find and review relevant pieces of work much more easily and quickly.
- b) provision of printouts of mark spreadsheets for each module so that EE could view these much more readily.
- c) provision of printouts of marking criteria for key assessments, particularly for project elements.
- d) provision of printout of broadsheet.
- e) better use of the March visit. Currently meeting with students was suboptimal due to low number of students and the students being directed to the wrong room for their programme. A more suitable time for EE to meet students would be at their Poster presentation.

The meeting with three students in March, in addition to some points already mentioned, revealed the following:

- Variability in support offered by Personal tutors
- Lack of clarity as to the identity of their programme lead
- Uncertainty about what was being done to address feedback from students i.e. how the feedback loop was being closed.

Part C: School Response to External Examiner Report

Name of School and Head of School (or nominee)

Title and Name of Examiner:

Subject(s):

Biological Sciences

Programme(s) / Module(s):

BSc/MBiol Biological Sciences
BSc/MBiol Biological Sciences (Biotechnology with Enterprise)
BSc Cell Biology of Human Disease

Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):

BSc/MBiol

Title and Name of Responder:

Position*:

Programme Leader (Biological Sciences, Biotechnology with Enterprise)

Faculty / School of:

Biological Sciences

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 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

We are pleased that the final year project and ATU modules are highlighted as good practice in helping to ensure that students are able to undertake and learn about cutting edge research. We have been working with colleagues to improve annotation of exam scripts for several years, and are delighted that [redacted] commends our practice in this area, though we note [redacted] comments regarding commentary on projects.

Response to Enhancements made from the previous year

N/A – this is [redacted] first year as EE

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:

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:

[redacted] raises no individual points here. However, we are aware from discussion during [redacted] visit in June and subsequent comments in [redacted] report that the introductory materials provided fell short of what [redacted] (and we) would have wished. See Progression and Awards section for more detailed comment.

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 are pleased with the positive comments made in relation to the overall structure of the course and the influence of research on it. The MBIol and Industrial placement variants of the programmes have Advanced Accreditation from the Royal Society of Biology.

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:

We are pleased that overall design, structure and standards of our assessments are considered appropriate. We are aware that some errors were identified in assessments this year, as noted here and in relation to Q34, 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.

We are grateful to _____ for suggestions regarding enhancement to assessment and feedback processes. While we have not previously used the TESTA process, we have mapped all assessments to programme Learning Outcomes, considered the overall assessment load and timetable for students and made changes as required (this is ongoing on an annual basis). We have also instigated a research project which has sought the views of students on assessment and feedback and made recommendations on the basis of findings.

We will endeavour to undertake _____ suggestion that we should analyse the themes on the Biological Sciences programmes to identify any modules which might produce discrepancies in student performance based on their chosen theme.

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:

We recognise that _____ did not receive adequate briefing about the programme during _____ visit in March, owing at least in part to the Programme Leader's absence due to extreme weather, and subsequent incorrect assumptions about what materials would have been provided automatically by the QA team to a new External Examiner. We are reviewing the programme-specific material provided to External Examiners at Faculty level and will ensure that that the appropriate documentation is provided in advance of the visit, and an initial briefing takes place with the Programme Leader during the visit.

We apologise for the insufficient time given for review of January Exam papers: we have reviewed our timelines and will ensure that it is not repeated.

We note _____ comment about commentary on projects, and will follow up on _____ suggestion to use anonymised examples of commentary to exemplify good practice; this may form a presentation at a staff meeting to increase engagement with staff.

Our Awards board has never been conducted anonymously. This has been discussed more than once in the past few years, and colleagues who teach on the programmes are strongly in favour of retaining our current model. We have discussed this again between programme leaders, the Examination Officer and the DSE, and still feel that our current processes are designed to prevent bias or unfairness. For the overwhelming majority of students, including those at borderlines, there are stringent guidelines in place which determine how the degree classification is arrived at, which are clearly set out in the Code of

Practice and rigorously adhered to. The only students whose classification is discussed in more detail are those with mitigating circumstances, where we ask our External Examiners to input their views based on an overview of all the assessments undertaken by the student concerned. Discussion of these students does not include any information based on staff members' personal observations.

We note the suggestion that our Special Cases Committee should indicate the degree of severity of each student's mitigating circumstances, to aid the Examination Board's decision-making. This is in principle a helpful suggestion, but in practice we consider it potentially problematic, in that it is difficult to assess the severity of the effect of any particular mitigating circumstance on the individual student – the same circumstance (e.g. a close family bereavement) can have profoundly different effects on the performance of different students, depending on a range of factors such as their personality, the support network that they can draw upon, etc. Discussions of the possible introduction of some type of grading system have been instigated by the Faculty Student Education Strategy Group.

Other comments

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

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 printed, rather than electronic versions of key documents. We will invite the External Examiners for the Biological Sciences (and Microbiology) programmes to the poster presentation session in May to meet and interact with students.

Changes to modules in response to student feedback are included in module outlines, and in Module Introduction talks. The minutes of Staff-student forum meetings are uploaded for students to access. Student representatives are encouraged to feedback directly to their student groups following staff student forum meetings, and where they have been asked to raise a particular issue with programme/module Leaders during the year. All these actions are designed to close the feedback loop, but we understand that some students remain unaware of the mechanisms to provide feedback, and may not recognise the changes that result: this is an area that we are constantly working to improve.