

The University of Leeds
EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2017-18

QAT Received 02/08/2018

Part A: General Information

Subject area and awards being examined

Title and Name of Examiner:

Faculty / School of:

Biological Sciences

Subject(s):

Microbiology

Programme(s) / Module(s):

MICR degree programmes

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

It is clear that the degrees in the School of Biological Sciences are research led and that this has a positive effect on the educational outcomes of the students. This is most evident in the Advanced Topic Units and final year Projects.

Enhancements made from the previous year

I did not identify any significant enhancements from the previous year excepting for the welcome disappearance of the University-imposed 20-90% scoring system.

Matters for Urgent Attention

I have the clear impression that the FBS administrative support network is struggling to provide an adequate level of support during the busy examinations period. As a result a number of issues arose this year – some of which were previously reported by myself and my fellow external examiners in previous years.

For Examiners in the first year of appointment

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

For Examiners completing their term of appointment

4.	Have you observed improvements in the programme(s) over the period of your appointment?	N
5.	Has the school responded to comments and recommendations you have made?	N

6.	Where recommendations have not been implemented, did the school provide clear reasons for this?	In part
7.	Have you acted as an External Examiner Mentor?	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

The overall experience of the External Examiners has declined over the three years that I have been in post and many of the suggestions that we have made have been listened to but not implemented. It is clear that this is, in part, due to changes in personnel at both the academic and administrative level. There appears not to be an extensive "to do" list for preparing for the visit of the external examiners. On the positive side I was provided with an extremely useful set of data sheets containing a detailed breakdown of the marks for each assessed module. In addition, on request, a printed copy of the combined uploaded marks was provided. I therefore had access to the all the data I required to perform my duties. I also received good support during the two days from both administrative and academic members of staff during my visit. I have listed below some points that need to be attended to. First and foremost, there needs to be single person who is responsible overall for the conduct of the examination process.

1. I have previously commented that the three examiners are located in a very small room and that the students' work is provided in boxes. This considerably reduces the efficiency with which the examiners are able to access the work of individual students – I think nearly as much time is spent moving boxes around and searching for individual pieces of work as actually reviewing the work and the marks. This is highly unsatisfactory and very different from experiences I have had as External Examiner for three other degree programmes in the UK and Ireland. I think it is not unreasonable for the reports and exam answers to be organised by students (rather than exams) in a room that has the space to lay these out on a desktop rather than in boxes. One consequence of the current location is that there was very little opportunity to look at Stage 1 and Stage 2 marks.
2. I detected errors on both the addition of marks and the recording of marks and therefore a more robust checking system needs to be put in place to ensure this is not repeated in subsequent years.
3. An out of date mark sheet was used for one of the assessments (Biol5382M) that caused some problems because of differences in the distribution of marks.
4. Login onto the Leeds FBS website was a problem (again). Passwords had expired and we also had problems resulting from the new data protection laws. This need to be sorted out in advance so that the external examiner does not have to contact the Leeds Computer services for themselves.
5. As previously reported by myself and other external examiners, the meeting in March is not productive. This year I met one student whom I might have been expected to spend an hour talking to. It would be much more productive had we attended say an oral or poster presentation given by the students. If this were not possible, I would recommend abandoning the March meeting altogether.
6. As with last year, we were sent the draft exam papers and asked to comment on them with a very short notice (just a few days). In the end the deadline was extended, but all of the examiners were concerned that this might have been seen as an acceptable practice. I received no feedback on the comments I submitted.
7. There does not seem to be a clear way of categorising the impact of mitigating circumstances.

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.

The intended learning outcomes are appropriate for BSc/MBiol degrees at a leading UK university. The course is structured so that in each year the students build on and extend information given in the earlier elements of the course, it is therefore surprising and illogical, as I have noted in my last two reports, that equal weight is given to the modules in the final two years. I have not noted this approach at other equivalent universities who consider the progressive nature of the course to be important, and weighted accordingly. I have yet to be provided with an adequate justification for this approach and in my opinion it does not make sound academic sense. I was not able to accept the explanation for this university-wide policy that I was provided with last year. There is considerable concern in the UK about “grade inflation” and I believe this policy contributes to this issue in Leeds. I suspect it is part of the “one size fits all” approach that seems to be common among university-wide Teaching and Learning Committees. I appreciate that it might be justifiable in some Arts and Humanities courses, where some course are taken by both Stage 2 and Stage 3 students, but is not justifiable for courses in which knowledge is built on progressively. This is particularly the case for the FBS degree programmes in which the Advanced Topic Units are one of the standout aspects of the Leeds programme. Yet they have the same assessment weight as a more general course given at the beginning of the second year.

A valuable element of the programme is the course designed for intercalating Medical Students since this provides an opportunity to introduce to these potential clinicians important aspects of microbiology that are nowadays only superficially covered in the regular MBBS degree programme. It is notable that this cohort of students performs well – a reflection presumably of their entry qualifications.

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)

The final year of the degree programme and the intercalating programme benefit from the fact that the majority of the teaching staff are research active and, as a result, the degree programme is genuinely research led. One consequence is that the breadth of the final year course is correspondingly restricted, which I perceive as a strength rather than a weakness. The research interests of the staff are reflected in the final year advanced topic units and research projects which, as commented on above, are one of the many excellent aspect of the degree programme. The course can legitimately claim to be research led, and it is therefore all the more surprising, as indicated above, that these modules can carry the same weight as modules in the penultimate year. In other words the curriculum is progressive, but the assessment is not.

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:
Not applicable

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:
Not applicable

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:
Not applicable

Assessment and Feedback

17.	Does the programme design clearly align intended learning outcomes with assessment?	Y / N
<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 intended learning outcomes are appropriate for BSc/MBiol degrees and the assessment criteria for each of the modules are appropriate for these ILOs. A clear set of instructions is provided to markers of exam scripts: the first marker annotates the script in detail and this is generally done well. The annotation clearly indicates factually correct and inaccurate information and where there is evidence of supplementary reading. The script, together with the mark scheme is then passed to a moderator. If the marks of the moderator vary by more than +/- 5% then a moderated mark is agreed. These procedures appear to work well, excepting for the errors in the addition and recording of marks.</p> <p>I was please to see that the conversion of marks to a 20-90% scale has been abandoned, particularly since nobody could provide a justification for this. Its introduction a number of years ago seems to be another example of the "one size fits all" policy by the university's Teaching and Learning Committee!</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>The cohort demonstrated a range of abilities and, as a result, there was a spread of final degree classifications from first to lower seconds class. The exception to this was the intercalating medical students, the majority of whom obtained first class degrees. There were some outstanding pieces of work produced by the students in exam answers project/dissertation reports. It is clear the very best students are performing at a very high level. Overall, the student performances are equivalent to standards I have observed at other top UK and Irish universities.</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?	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?	Y
35.	Were you satisfied with the way decisions from the School Special Circumstances meeting were communicated to the Progression and Awards Board?	Y / N

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

I am grateful for the support I received from the admin and academic staff prior to and during my visit. Again this year I sensed that the admin staff in particular were more stretched, and this was not helped by their lack of experience from previous years. This did cause a number of issues. As implied above, there is a need for a single person to take ownership of the entire process and to ensure that the staff are fully trained and understand the requirements needed by the external examiners to discharge their responsibilities.

As is now common at UK universities, the opportunity to meet the students was limited with the demise of the viva. This year it considered of a one-hour session over lunch with a self-selected group of students (or in my case with just a single student). This is not an effective use of time and I and the other examiners have suggested that we could instead be invited to the student poster or oral presentation sessions. This would provide an opportunity to discuss academic issues with the students and to gain a clearer impression of their academic qualities. At my university, the external examiners are invited to attend the students' oral presentations of their project work, and this seems to be popular with our external examiners.

Other comments

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

This year the examinations process was made more challenging as a result of the industrial action that took place earlier in the year. I was fully briefed about the impact of this action on the degree programme for which I was responsible and was satisfied with the actions that were taken to ensure there was no negative impact on the students or their assessment.

There were some really exceptional project reports this year – indeed some of the best I have ever seen

The examination papers were fair and appropriately challenging.

This is my last year as examiner at Leeds. I would like to thank all the staff involved in making my visits pleasant and for the ways in which various of the staff have responded positively when problems have arisen. Although this year proved problematical in a number of respects, and changes need to be made to aspects of the external examiners experience, the impression of my time as external examiner is overwhelmingly positive.

Part C: School Response to External Examiner Report

Name of School and Head of School (or nominee)

Title and Name of Examiner:

Subject(s):

Microbiology (MICR)

Programme(s) / Module(s):

BSc, MBIol Microbiology ; BSc Microbiology with Immunology ; BSc Microbiology with Virology ; BSc Microbiology in Relation to Medicine ; BSc Medical Microbiology

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

BSc and Mbiol

Title and Name of Responder:

Position*:

Lecturer/Programme Leader for Microbiology

Faculty / School of:

School of Molecular and Cellular Biology/Faculty 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 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 are pleased that _____ recognises our efforts to provide extensive research-led teaching throughout the MICR programme, and that _____ can identify a positive effect on the students' educational outcomes.

Response to Enhancements made from the previous year

_____ was highly supportive of the decision of the central university to abolish the 20-90% scoring system. Otherwise, no significant changes were made to the programme, and correspondingly identified no necessary actions.

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:

_____ identified one matter for urgent attention, which was whether the FBS administrative staff has the resources to provide all the necessary support during the examination period. The evidence for this statement was a number of administrative errors relating to the summing of examination scores. A more detailed commentary on this matter is provided below.

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:

This was _____ third and final year as the MICR external examiner, and as such _____ provided information relating to the changes of the MICR programme in the past year, as well as over the entire period of _____

appointment. The majority of comments surround the external examination process, and the logistics of providing and organising the materials required to perform examination duties. stated that while was provided with all the necessary information, clear improvements could be made to facilitate the external examination procedure. These include a more timely provision of draft exam papers, more physical space to arrange exam materials, different organisation of critical documents and also improved access to on-line resources.

In response to these comments, we are reviewing the programme-specific material provided to External Examiners and will ensure that the appropriate documentation is provided in advance of the visit, and an initial briefing takes place with the Programme Leader during the visit. In addition, the school will provide a larger room for all external examination duties and arrange the examination materials by student name and not by module. We recognise our dependence on the services of the external examiner to maintain the quality of our courses, and all efforts must be made to facilitate their task.

In addition, noted numerous errors that occurred during addition and recording of marks, as well as provision of correct marking schemes, and has suggested that changes must be made to ensure these events are not repeated. One such suggestion is to appoint one individual with overall responsibility for conduct of the examination process.

To remedy this situation, 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.

Finally, raised a comment that was specific to MICR. stated that the current mid-March visit of the examiner is not useful, and that a more beneficial exercise would be to schedule the visit instead during the final project poster session. This is an excellent suggestion that we are working towards implementing.

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:

Overall is complementary of the course content, structure and delivery of the IOLs, which states are in line with other institutions or national subject benchmark expectations. also re-stated previous concerns regarding the equal weighting of level 1 and level 2 scores, which believes does not make strong academic sense in a course with progressive content. Currently, equal weighting is a university wide approach, and we are required to use it. However, these comments are noted and Quality Assurance will provide a response to the university rule.

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:

commented that the assessment methods currently in place are appropriate, and no major issues were raised. notes, with relief, that the 20-90% scaling has been abolished. We thank for vocal contributions to the implementation of this change in assessment policy.

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:

again stated that the administrative arrangements were not satisfactory for the whole examination process, reinforcing the comments and necessary actions described above.

In addition, and more specifically, stated that decisions from the special circumstances panel were poorly communicated. This feeds into his previous comment that the impact of circumstances is poorly categorised and should be reviewed. In response to this, discussions of the possible introduction of some type of grading system have been instigated by the Faculty Student Education Strategy Group.

reiterated that an opportunity to meet the students face-to-face would be beneficial to examiner duties, and suggested that a sensible occasion for this to occur was during the final year poster presentation session. I agree that this would be a beneficial step forward and will ensure that future external examiners are invited to this session.

Other comments

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

We are indebted to for considerable time and effort spend reviewing our examination process, and we are extremely pleased that views experience as being positive. Implementation of many of suggestions provided over the three years of tenure will make considerable improvements to not only the MICR degree programme, but also others within the school.