

The University of Leeds
EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2017-18

QAT Received 12/07/2018

Part A: General Information

Subject area and awards being examined

Title and Name of Examiner:

Faculty / School of:

Biological Sciences / Biomedical Sciences

Subject(s):

Medical Sciences

Programme(s) / Module(s):

BSc Medical Sciences; BSc Medical Sciences (Industrial); BSc Medical Sciences (International); MBIol, BSc Medical Sciences (Integrated Masters)

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.

This is my first year as external examiner for the Medical Sciences BSc and MBIol, and my overall impression is very positive of both the degrees and the standard of student achievement.

Standards of marking of both examination scripts and in course work were high and in line with what I would expect to see at my own institution and others where I have worked as an external examiner. The overall outturn of the exam committee was appropriate and I felt that each student was awarded correctly within the framework that the committee worked to. The research-led aspects to the teaching, reflected particularly in the advanced scientific skills, advanced topics and research project, are excellent. I am also very impressed by the fact that the course manages to retain a significant amount of tutorial/seminar-based teaching including in the third year advanced scientific skills module. This is not achieved in a number of competitor courses/institutions and while resource-intensive is something that I would encourage retention of: it is absolutely an example of best practice. The use of a matrix for marking, and its inclusion on the mark sheet itself is very good practice.

The research project write-ups that I read, both third and fourth year, were of a high standard. The MBIol extended project write-ups that I viewed were very strong indeed. The inclusion of a self-reflection exercise within projects is an excellent idea, innovative and one that I will encourage my own institution to consider adding to projects for our students. Association of a project proposal with the MBIol projects is another example of good practice, and one which provides opportunity for development of important skills. The MBIol project also includes other innovative aspects such as the development of a methods wiki. I have not yet had the chance to look at one of these, but in principle these should be very useful.

The breadth of third year projects for BSc students was very good, with the choice of literature-based critical review projects alongside 'wet' laboratory research a very reasonable alternative. There is considerable pressure to provide a range of project opportunities, and matching these to student career options is relevant. I do though have some reservations about educational development projects. These frequently require qualitative skills that bioscience students typically will not have developed and this can cause problems, particularly for weaker students and/or if supervision is not close and careful to include the necessary training in this area. I only had the time to read one education-based project this year. I will be interested to see further projects of this type to see how they are managed and the marks that students achieve in comparison to other project types, particularly when compared to the same students' performance in other parts of the degree.

Enhancements made from the previous year

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

As a newly appointed external examiner I am not able to comment here, particularly as no significant areas for improvement were identified by the previous external and there were no areas to follow up on.

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

None

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
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.

The overall programme structure is much as I would expect in a high-quality course in the Medical/Biomedical Sciences. A broad range of modules is provided, moving from compulsory modules in first year to more options as students move to second and third years. Alongside this, there is a clear increase in the content that is research-led including, within the project, opportunity for students to design, carry out and interpret their own research. There is ample opportunity for students to develop both degree-specific and transferrable skills, ability to critically appraise, and, to a reasonable extent, tailor their degree to the interests that they have developed through the available optional modules. From the materials I have accessed and/or had provided to me I am fully confident that the course meets the expressed aims and learning outcomes and also that it meets (exceeds) national subject benchmark.

13.	Is the influence of research on the curriculum and learning and teaching clear?	Y
<p><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></p> <p>Yes, research clearly leads a significant fraction of the curriculum. This is particularly clear in the compulsory advanced scientific skills and research project and the optional advanced topics modules of the 3rd year. This is, as would be expected, enhanced in the 4th year of the integrated masters.</p>		
14.	Does the programme form part of an Integrated PhD?	N
<p><i>Please comment on the appropriateness of the programme as training for a PhD:</i></p> <p>There has been a significant move in recent years towards PhD studentships in biosciences being awarded to students with/studying towards master level qualifications and/or having expanded research experience over what can be gained via an undergraduate degree (the majority of students starting PhD study in my institution in biosciences have M level training). This is driven by the highly competitive nature of the process. However, students graduating from high quality BSc programmes are fully equipped to embark on a PhD, and I have a strong impression that, with the research and critical skills emphasised in the Leeds Medical Sciences BSc, it is certainly an appropriate training for a PhD. The additional experience and skill development in the 4th year of study towards the integrated masters, in my opinion, adds significantly to this and should make students graduating with this qualification highly competitive for PhD positions as well as in other career choices.</p>		
15.	Does the programme include clinical practice components?	N
<p><i>Please comment on the learning and assessment of practice components of the curriculum here:</i></p> <p>N/A</p>		
16.	Is the programme accredited by a Professional or Statutory Regulatory Body (PSRB)?	Y
<p><i>Please comment on the value of, and the programme's ability to meet, PSRB requirements here:</i></p> <p>As I understand it, the integrated masters and industrial placement variant of the BSc in Medical Sciences have advanced accreditation with the Royal Society of Biology. This accreditation is increasingly recognised as important for degree programmes in the biological sciences, providing a useful 'benchmark' for potential applicants to gauge programmes at different universities. This accreditation highlights degrees that include a significant research component and 'capstone' experience, and in particular that graduates have the opportunity to develop a set of key skills and abilities. Other variants of the BSc should also meet accreditation criteria, though from my experience I would not be surprised if the RSB queried whether all the different project options meet what the Society expects.</p>		

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>A broad range of appropriate assessment methods/types are used which assess knowledge and skills including data analysis and critical abilities. Work that I viewed was marked appropriately.</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>Student performance overall was to a high standard, with all bar a very few students obtaining a 1st class or 2.1 degree. At first glance this could be concerning as one might expect the distribution to be broader. The work that I reviewed was entirely</p>		

consistent with the level of award and thus this was a high-achieving cohort. Students demonstrated their knowledge and ability in answering a number of types of exam questions (essay, data-handling etc), as well as within their project write-ups.

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

None

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

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

A number of exam essay scripts I reviewed had very little, if any, annotation from the second marker. Given that the external examiner's report from 2017 commented that student scripts were well annotated it may be that this has slipped a little this year or that the scripts I saw happened to be ones where this was not the case. I would encourage second marking to always include brief confirmatory comment and addition of further notes/comments where appropriate.

I was very grateful for the excellent support I received from both academic and administrative staff prior to and during the exam board. The exam board ran very smoothly and efficiently. I was fully in agreement with all decisions reached at the exam board.

There is one issue which I think should be reflected on: the exam board was held with student names shown. Most of the decision-making was based on marks profile and a formula applied to decide whether or not a student should be promoted from a borderline position to the upper degree classification and thus the presence/absence of student names could have no effect. However, for students whose profile requires discussion having them named opens the

possibility that discussion and decision-making could be affected by subjective comment from board members. This could also provide leverage for appeals against a board's decisions.

Given that objective decision-making is the aim of exam boards, for them to function (and to be seen to function) in a manner that drives the objectivity of the process is critical. A number of years ago my university moved, at institutional level, to running exam committees in such a way that it is not possible to identify students (random, computer-generated identifiers are used). Where I have acted as an external examiner previously final exam boards were run with marks considered anonymously.

Any step that reduces the perception that there could be bias in marking and/or decisions on student awards is positive. I suggest that your very thorough process would be further improved by considering marks, progression and awards on an anonymous basis at the final exam board. There is opportunity after decisions have been made to reveal names, identify prize-winners etc.

Other comments

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

Unfortunately, due to bad weather I was unable to attend the external examiner visit day in February, and as a result I did not get to meet any of your students this year. I look forward to being able to do this next year, as getting student perspective is a very helpful and important part of the external examiner role.

Part C: School Response to External Examiner Report

Name of School and Head of School (or nominee)

Title and Name of Examiner:

Subject(s):

Medical Sciences

Programme(s) / Module(s):

BSc Medical Sciences
MBiol, BSc Medical Sciences

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

BSc, MBiol

Title and Name of Responder:

Position*:

Programme Leader, UG Medical Sciences

Faculty / School of:

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

The external examiner highlighted our emphasis on research-led teaching, and in particular pointed to our use of small group teaching across all levels as particular evidence of good practice. The use of a defined marking matrix, linked to student-accessible assessment criteria, was also flagged as good practice.

Response to Enhancements made from the previous year

The previous external examiner did not highlight any specific areas for improvement this year. As a School, we are continuing to encourage staff to make more detailed annotations to assessments and exam scripts, an area in which improvements can always be made.

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:

None.

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:

_____ is starting _____ first year as External Examiner for the Medical Sciences programmes at Leeds. _____ has extensive experience of acting as External Examiner for similar programmes at other institutions.

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:

Fundamentally, the External Examiner is confident that we offer a coherent programme with appropriate focus on subject-specific, transferrable and core scientific skills. The course content is appropriate for the programme aims and learning outcomes, and at the very least meets national benchmarks. The breadth of the curriculum was highlighted, along with our focus on research-led teaching and the critical, evidence-based thinking skills that this promotes. Our graduates as a result are highly competitive for PhD programmes.

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:

The External Examiner is confident that we use an appropriate range of assessment methods, evaluating not only subject knowledge, but also critical thinking and other core skills. Marking was fair and appropriate, allowing students to fully demonstrate their achievements, the range of their knowledge and the development of their skills.

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:

The External Examiner specifically commented on the fair, balanced and thorough way in which the Exam Board considered all cases (but see (1), below). While observing that the great majority of students achieved 1/2.1 class degrees, the External Examiner felt that this simply reflected the high level of ability of the cohort.

Other comments

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

Issues that should be considered at School and/or Faculty level are:

1. In line with the practice at other institutions, the External Examiner would like us to consider anonymising the marks profile that our Exam Board reviews during the process of finalising degree classifications. This could be particularly important when considering borderline cases. The position of the External Examiner is that this would ensure absolute objectivity and remove even the perception of bias in the Board's deliberations. We have raised this as an item for discussion with the Faculty Assessment & Standards Group and with the University.
2. In relation to Royal Society of Biology accreditation, we are aware that the Society accredits degrees that include a diverse range of project-types at BSc level. We have not applied for accreditation for our 3 year BSc degree programmes but will seek to renew advanced accreditation for our four year BSc (Industrial variant) and Integrated Masters in 2019.
3. As a School, we will reinforce our policy for second markers of exam scripts to provide sufficient comments/notes to allow the External Examiner to follow the process by which a mark was agreed.