

The University of Leeds
EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2018-19 QAT Received 26/07/2019

Part A: General Information

Subject area and awards being examined

Title and Name of Examiner:

Faculty / School of:

Faculty of Biological Sciences, School of Biomedical Sciences

Subject(s):

Medical Sciences

Programme(s) / Module(s):

BSc Medical Sciences – all programme variants;
MBiol, BSc Medical Sciences (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.

As last year I was impressed by the standard and consistency of marking in the work that I reviewed. Marking standards were very much in line with what I would expect at my own institution and others where I have worked as external examiner, annotation of scripts was in general good and I think all markers for this. I would reiterate that the research-led aspects to the teaching, and particularly the advanced topics modules and research projects are excellent, and examples of good practice. The cohort graduating this year included a high proportion of students who had undertaken an industrial placement year. I would commend the organisation and support for this: placements are not easy to obtain and that such a high proportion of the cohort managed to do this reflects very well on the students themselves, but also the support that they receive in achieving this.

I would highlight again the use of marking rubrics for some exercises – notably projects and the inclusion of the completed rubrics within the materials available to examiners. This provides a very clear view of how the project has been perceived by the marker, and allows a quick and effective comparison between the two project markers. Whatever changes might be suggested to marking please do not remove these!

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 did not note any significant alterations to the programme or process this 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

None

For Examiners in the first year of appointment only

| | | |
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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? | N |

For Examiners completing their term of appointment only

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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

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| 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 programme structure is as I would expect in a high-quality Medical/Biomedical Sciences course. The broad range of modules provided, particularly in the later years of the programme is commendable and provides significant choice for students to tailor studies to their own interest. The course provides rich opportunity for development of both subject specific and transferrable skills, including reflective practice, critical thinking and presentation. I am fully confident that the course meets the expressed aims and learning outcomes and also that it meets (exceeds) national subject benchmark.

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| 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)

Research clearly leads a significant proportion of the curriculum, including the compulsory advanced scientific skills module, excellent range of research based project opportunities and optional advanced topics modules.

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| 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:

As I noted previously, with PhD studentships increasingly being awarded to students with/carrying out masters degrees or having expanded research experience, BSc qualifications no longer have the same currency in applications. However, a good quality research-led BSc such as the Medical Sciences does prepare students very well for PhD and students graduating with this may well be successful in applications for PhD depending on the competition. Students completing the MBiol course have significantly expanded research training and will make students highly competitive for PhD. I would be interested in seeing the destinations data for students on the course if this were available.

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| 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:

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| 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>The courses (MBiol and BSc with industrial placement variants) have Royal Society of Biology Accreditation. This useful 'benchmark' of potential applicant's highlights degrees with significant research components, and which provide opportunity for students to develop key subject-specific skills. This accreditation is then valuable and the course, in my view, meets the criteria for it.</p> | | |

Assessment and Feedback

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| 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 assessments are used in this course, and key skills and knowledge are assessed. Importantly this includes critical skills, data analysis and integration. Marking that I have seen was appropriate and consistent.</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 was at a high standard, reflected in the distribution of award classifications. This was particularly the case within the group who had carried out industrial placements, almost half of whom obtained a first class award. This is not unexpected, as the added experience and maturity that students garner through a placement is frequently reflected in achievement.</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

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| 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 |

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| 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:

Overall I have had a very positive experience this year, with very strong support from the PS staff associated with the programme and, when required, from the programme lead and other academic staff.

I visited Leeds for the external examiner day in March, reviewed some first semester work then (which made my task easier when I visited in June), and met with students. This was a very helpful and well organised day, students were extremely complementary about their course. They did feedback that they would like more laboratory sessions in second year, and that there was a lack of physiology and endocrinology project options in third year. Clearly projects can only be provided in areas where there are staff to deliver them, but it is worth passing this information back in case there are untapped resources in these areas which were clearly of interest to the cohort/students I met. Another comment to relay is that students felt that there was some conflict in terms of time pressure/timetabling between the advanced topics units and project work.

The use of formulae as a general means of determining whether a borderline candidate should be promoted from below to above a degree boundary is a practice that has gained traction in recent years and is in general a good route to resolving this issue. However, and I hope I am representing this correctly, the pre-exam board committee had difficulty with at least one case where a student had the required credits from second and third year for promotion but it was subsequently noted that some of these were from a discovery module which was at a lower level and thus had to be excluded from the calculation leaving them short of credits in the upper bracket.

When I asked staff further about this it was not clear whether students would have been clearly informed, when they made their optional module choices that taking a discovery module could in fact impact on their degree outcome in this way. This should be addressed, though it may result in fewer students taking advantage of the option to include a discovery module in their studies. I perceive the discovery modules as a positive option, so this would be shame, but the importance of providing the information is clear.

Finally, I would reiterate that I do not agree with student names being shown during exam boards as individual cases are being discussed. I know that this was discussed in the last year and a decision made to retain this practice. However, I cannot see any reason why names should be used rather than an anonymous number. Any concerns about correct marks should have been resolved well before marks arrive at a final exam committee, and as I noted last year having names present provides opportunity for subjective comment to influence decisions. Indeed (and I can't recall which programme the student was on), after one of the external examiners had made comment on the work of a student in a discretionary zone, when the chair then opened up discussion on the case the first thing said was along the lines of 'I know this student well and.....'. Removing names would avoid the influence that such comments could have, and would be in the interests of ensuring that an otherwise exemplary exam board process is functioning in a manner that ensures its objective decision making.

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:

Subject(s):

Medical Sciences

Programme(s) / Module(s):

BSc Medical Sciences – all programme variants;
MBiol, BSc Medical Sciences (Integrated Masters) – all programme variants

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

BSc / MBiol

Title and Name of Responder:

Position*:

Programme Leader, Medical Sciences

Faculty / School of:

Faculty of Biological Sciences, School of Biomedical 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) must be sent 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

It was pleasing to see that continued to highlight our emphasis on research-led teaching, in particular the very strong focus in this in the final year. also flagged up the use of a clear, student-accessible marking criteria as good practice – we strongly encourage all our students to read these and use them to better prepare for assessments.

Response to Enhancements made from the previous year

There were no specific enhancements suggested by the External Examiner in the previous year. However, as a School, we are introducing new measures in particular around 'student voice', introducing new ways to inform our student's how/when we have made changes in response to their feedback and comments.

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 required.

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:

No specific issues were raised.

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 External Examiner specifically commented that the course content and scientific training does meet all of the programme learning objectives. It also provides sufficient range of modules to maintain engagement by our students as their own scientific (and career) interests develop. As a programme, we are very aware that many of our students go on to pursue diverse, often non-scientific, career paths – because of this, we work hard to ensure a strong theme of transferable and professional skills training embedded in the core science that we deliver. It was

also very pleasing to note that the External Examiner is of the opinion that we exceed the national subject benchmark.

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 assessment process was deemed to be appropriate and conducted meticulously. The range of assessment modes were also considered appropriate for the programme and module learning outcomes, with emphasis where appropriate on professional and transferrable skills. As a programme group, we continue to monitor our portfolio of assessments to ensure that we assess the right things at the right time, without over-assessing our students.

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:

Several points were highlighted by the External Examiner:

1. The proportion of First Class degrees amongst students undertaking the industrial placement year. This was not raised as a problem, but it is worth highlighting: industrial placement is becoming increasingly popular, has clear benefits in terms of employability, and is very attractive to prospective students. We should highlight the extent to which it accelerates academic performance.
2. Impact of Discovery modules on final degree classification. The External Examiner raised a concern that students were not aware that taking a Level 2 Discovery module at Level 3 could impact on their automatic promotion to a higher degree classification. A clear explanation of the criteria used to decide on promotion is now included in the Programme Leader's introductory lecture to the final year cohort, including a detailed discussion of the potential impact of taking a Discovery module. In general, final year students are strongly discouraged from taking Level 2 Discovery modules unless the student can make a strong case that the module matches specific professional/career aspirations.
3. Anonymity of students during Examination/Progression and Classification Board meetings. The External Examiner emphasised again that he strongly believes that we (as a Faculty) should move towards considering individual students by Student ID only, not by name. We have revisited this conversation within the Faculty and will be looking to pilot the anonymisation of Final Award Boards in some areas for 2020.

Other comments

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