

**The University of Leeds**  
**EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT**

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2018-19

QAT Received 13/09/2019

**Part A: General Information**

**Subject area and awards being examined**

*Title and Name of Examiner:*

*Faculty / School of:*

Faculty of Biological Sciences, School of Biology

*Subject(s):*

*Biology*

*Programme(s) / Module(s):*

BSc Biology – all programme variants  
MBiol, BSc Biology (Integrated Masters) – all programme variants  
BSc Biology with Enterprise - all programme variants  
MBiol, BSc Biology with Enterprise (Integrated Masters) – all programme variants

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

MBiol/ BSc

**Part B: Comments for the Institution on the Examination Process and Standards**

**Points of innovation and/or good practice**

We had a very interesting meeting with quite a large group of students. On asking for the highlights of their time at Leeds, my notes have: that the students really appreciate the exposure to cutting edge research, right across years of study; that staff are enthusiastic and good practitioners.

I noted in my verbal comments to staff a very commendable quality of commenting on written scripts – both C/W and exams. Staff often follow the guidance for script annotation, which makes the moderation process more effective.

**Enhancements made from the previous year**

If I have it right, the programme teams have worked to standardise the structure of exams. I think that this may have been in relation to another external's comments, but it is (in my view) a sensible move which will help students. We have done a similar process at

I am not convinced that all module teachers really understand the implications of this for assessment design. I take this point up later in the document.

**Matters for Urgent Attention**

We noted some disconnects between student perceptions and actual practice. I discussed this with staff in June, but I would suggest that all staff consider this one point as we go forward into the next academic year.

1) Students submit electronically, and paper copies are printed, marked and deposited in the Faculty Admin office for collection. Marks are delivered onto the VLE – often by a PDF with ID numbers associated with marks.

2) Students that we met had apparently a poor understanding that they should collect their work and look at the feedback. Some believed that there is no feedback. This is a real shame; as external I can attest to the good practice in written feedback.

3) It may (or may not) be that part of the issue is submission & delivery of marks electronically, but the feedback is on paper.

Not sure how the teams want to address this; it may be that all you need is very clear – and repeated – communication with students will lessen this issue.

--

**For Examiners in the first year of appointment only**

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

**For Examiners completing their term of appointment only**

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

These are very well appreciated programmes, both students and staff are engaged; the programmes function very well. The content and progression are great and are certainly comparable with equivalent programmes elsewhere.

My general comment is that I find there is a stronger emphasis on factual recall rather than interpretation and evaluation (what students know and understand, rather than what they can do with those understandings).

This is evident in the design of exam papers, where both long and short answers are typically focused on recall of taught materials, rather than e.g. using knowledge in an interpretive manner. There is, of course, interpretive assessment elsewhere, e.g. in practical write-ups. I'm not suggesting that the assessment diet is monotonously focused on recall.

These qualities are written into your programme specifications (enquiry, evaluation), I wonder whether as an academic community there regular reflection on is where these sit in the overall pattern of assessments.

{In writing this, I should point out that I did my educational training with you at Leeds; a PCGE in Secondary Education, back in 1991; so this is not a particularly perspective! }

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

Yes, students and staff both attest to this.

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
<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>As staff will know, I query the nature of short answer questions in at least some modules.</p> <p>I think in some modules far too much is asked for the time available to students – 15 minutes to read, consider and write the answer. Some of these are really essay titles, and should not be set as SAQs. Some are SAQs but ask for too much material. Because so much could be covered, students can – in some circumstances - get similar marks for writing very different answers; it's then hard to moderate.</p> <p><i>So, if I had any advice for the team, it would be to collectively focus on (i) what are the educational purposes of SAQs in their assessments, (ii) how will they address parity and reasonableness in the quantity of response needed to answer the questions, (iii) how can clear mark-schemes be constructed so that the allocation of marks is clear to those moderating?</i></p> <p>I do think that SAQs can be sometimes used more effectively by asking students to interpret / evaluate data, solve problems etc. So in the longer run, the team may want to spend some time checking that they are really using these assessments in the most effective manner.</p> <p>The team may – or may not – think this good advice; it's certainly can't be addressed overnight, but is (in my view) well worth the staff discussing collectively to try to seek consensus of good practice across equivalent modules.</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><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

I find the Leeds mechanism in which you internally review modules before externals arrive quite constraining.

1) We had a problem with one module this year, we had a short time to review and make a decision based on it. Can I ask then that we get a full board report before arrival, with any issues flagged in advance?

2) Many departments are using scatterplots (module marks on Y axis, average across all other modules on X axis) to identify unusual patterns of assessment. It's something I can recommend; we get rapid insights into assessment performance from this. Worth thinking about @ Leeds.

3) The Leeds structure – internal module board, externals arrive, FBoE – does rather distance examiners from the module staff themselves. I have not met and chatted to module leads in an informal setting, I think that would be valuable.

#### Other comments

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

In my time visiting Leeds I have seen really committed staff, met very engaged students, seen great educational practice.

Thanks for inviting me each year.

**Name of School and Head of School (or nominee)**

Title and Name of Examiner:

Subject(s):

*Biology*

Programme(s) / Module(s):

BSc Biology – all programme variants  
 MBiol, Biology (Integrated Masters) – all programme variants  
 BSc Biology with Enterprise – all programme variants  
 MBiol, BSc Biology with Enterprise (Integrated Masters) – all programme variants

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

MBiol / BSc

Title and Name of Responder:

Position\*:

Programme Leaders, Biology and Biology 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) must be sent directly to the External Examiner. A copy must also be emailed to the Quality Assurance Team at [gat@leeds.ac.uk](mailto: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 the examiner for thorough and thoughtful assessment of the degree programmes and in particular, recognition of the quality of mark justification and feedback provided to students in coursework and exam script annotations.

**Response to Enhancements made from the previous year**

We are grateful that the examiner is appreciative of the standardisation we have made to exam formats.

**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:

In the vast majority of cases hard copies of the work is required in addition to the VLE submission. All work is collected by the students and therefore they have access to the feedback of quality of which the examiner appreciates. Where marks are posted on the VLE we can also highlight at the same point that feedback is provided on any accompanying hard copies. The University is moving increasing towards electronic submission which is likely to resolve many of these issues.

**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:

n/a

**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 examiner is concerned that exam test recall and not interpretation and evaluation. However, the examiner also appreciates that interpretation and evaluation are tested elsewhere as part of modules. We offer a balance of assessment formats. That balance is different in different modules with students using assessment criteria as part of the selection criteria in choosing modules. Indeed some modules are wholly assessed 'in course' with no final 'recall examination'. We have exam script approval meetings prior to papers being sent to externals for comment. We will implement the guidelines of the external in our quality assessment of exam paper questions as appropriate to the level of study.

## 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 examiner is concerned that SAQs require too much material in the answer. All examination questions including SAQs together with model answers are reviewed prior to being formally set. This process ensures that the spirit of SAQs is maintained across modules. Students can get different marks for including different aspects of the model answer – this is true of all examination questions. We have reviewed SAQ structure in line with external examiner expectations over recent years, to help standardise student and examiner expectations.

## 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:*

*1) We had a problem with one module this year, we had a short time to review and make a decision based on it. Can I ask then that we get a full board report before arrival, with any issues flagged in advance?*

Yes, the Assessment Lead will provide a report after the internal exam board and ahead of the final exam board. This will consist of the minutes of the internal exam board, plus a foreword from the Assessment Lead highlighting any modules of concern that require particular attention from the external examiners.

*2) Many departments are using scatterplots (module marks on Y axis, average across all other modules on X axis) to identify unusual patterns of assessment. It's something I can recommend; we get rapid insights into assessment performance from this. Worth thinking about @ Leeds.*

We'll investigate whether scatterplots can be included within the TED database and available for view during internal exam boards and external examiner scrutiny before the final board. For the time being, the Assessment Lead will generate scatterplots for any modules of concern, and include these within the report.

*3) The Leeds structure – internal module board, externals arrive, FBoE – does rather distance examiners from the module staff themselves. I have not met and chatted to module leads in an informal setting, I think that would be valuable."*

If external examiners identify module managers they would like to speak to ahead of their visit in semester 2 (circa March), or ahead of the final board (i.e. after receipt of the Assessment Leads report), these meetings could be arranged (assuming the academic is in Leeds). Within the course of a 4-year term it should be possible to talk to all relevant module managers this way.

## Other comments

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

We are grateful for the examiner's kind words.