

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

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2018-19

QAT Received 22/07/2019

**Part A: General Information**

**Subject area and awards being examined**

*Title and Name of Examiner:*

*Faculty / School of:*

Faculty of Biological Sciences

*Subject(s):*

Ecology, Zoology (and programme variants)

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

BSc Zoology – all programme variants  
BSc Zoology in Relation to Medicine and Veterinary Science  
BSc Ecology and Conservation Biology – all programme variants  
BSc Ecology and Environmental Biology – all programme variants  
M Biol, BSc Zoology (Integrated Masters) – all programme variants  
M Biol, BSc Ecology and Conservation Biology (Integrated Masters) – all programme variants  
M Biol, BSc Ecology and Environmental Biology (Integrated Masters) – all programme variants

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

BSc/M Biol

**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.*  
I note innovation and good practice in terms of some refreshed subject matter as part of ongoing module/programme improvements, often attributable to new staff appointments. I am satisfied with the examination processes and standards and note care and scrutiny in this area by staff within the Faculty. The students on the courses I examined are stretched academically and rigorously assessed, using a full range of methods, leading to an excellent student experience. This was reflected by the students on the courses that I interviewed this year on two separate occasions.

**Enhancements made from the previous year**

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

There have been general improvements on how academics agree upon marks for final year projects, in particularly the justifications they use in relation to the marking criteria.

**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**

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 / <del>N</del>
5.	Has the school responded to comments and recommendations you have made?	Y / <del>N</del>
6.	Where recommendations have not been implemented, did the school provide clear reasons for this?	Y / <del>N</del>
7.	Have you acted as an External Examiner Mentor?	<del>Y</del> / 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*

I recognise considerable improvements to modules/programmes during my term as External Examiner. In particular, there have been improvements to modules in terms of both content refreshment and standardisation of assessment. Whereas some modules were previously over-assessed, there is now greater harmony across programmes using a variety of assessment types and mostly rooted in effective marking criteria. There is more care and attention to Learning Outcomes, joint-marking/training and student feedback. Overall, staff deliver a first class standard of degree programme, often with limited resources and large class sizes, to equip graduates with the skills they require to flourish in industry and/or academia. Staff pay heed to criticism and suggestions in a positive manner and are quick to make improvements in a rapidly changing HE sector.

## Standards

8.	Is the overall programme structure coherent and appropriate for the level of study?	Y / <del>N</del>
9.	Does the programme structure allow the programme aims and intended learning outcomes to be met?	Y / <del>N</del>
10.	Are the programme aims and intended learning outcomes commensurate with the level of award?	Y / <del>N</del>
11.	Did the Aims and ILOs meet the expectations of the national subject benchmark (where relevant)?	Y / <del>N</del>
12.	Is the programme(s) comparable with similar programmes at other institutions?	Y / <del>N</del>

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

As stated in previous years, the programme structures, design, aims and intended learning outcomes are excellent. I acknowledge that some academics do very well with the limited resources they have to manage large class sizes in some modules, although clearly it is preferable to have smaller classes in the 2nd and 3rd year.

13.	Is the influence of research on the curriculum and learning and teaching clear?	Y / <del>N</del>
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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)*

Much of the teaching is research-led and, based on discussions with some students, this is widely acknowledged and appreciated, leading to a distinct experience at Leeds. Students can also see the potential career pathways as a result. As stated in previous years, within individual modules, I encourage academics to not only teach the current 'paradigm', but perhaps make it explicit how their research contributes or even challenges this. This would potentially encourage more critical thinking. Regularly refreshing module content should be encouraged.

14.	Does the programme form part of an Integrated PhD?	<del>Y</del> / 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?	<del>Y</del> / 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)?	Y / N
<p><i>Please comment on the value of, and the programme's ability to meet, PSRB requirements here:</i>          These programmes are accredited by the Royal Society of Biology. Advanced degree accreditation by the Society recognises academic excellence in the biosciences, and highlights degrees that educate the research and development leaders of the future. The advanced accreditation criteria require evidence that graduates from the programme meet defined sets of learning outcomes, including gaining a substantial period of research experience.</p>		

### 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>During my terms I have observed improvements to ILOs and assessments across the board. As in previous years I continue to encourage diversity of assessment types and I recommend a greater focus on problem solving assessments (although acknowledge this is not always possible in large class sizes). There should be a move towards smaller classes in later stages of the degree programmes.</p>		
18.	Is the design and structure of the assessment methods appropriate to the level of award?	Y / N
19.	Were students given adequate opportunity to demonstrate their achievement of the programme aims and intended learning outcomes?	Y / N
<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>Over the past years as External Examiner I have observed cohort effects in terms of overall performance and marks, which can't be explained by any significant changes to the programmes. Thus I maintain that the students on the courses that I assessed are stretched and rigorously assessed to a very high academic standard. Overall, this leads to an excellent student experience.</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>Overall there appears to be better student involvement with module evaluation. However, they don't get to see it. Nor do External Examiners, yet this could be a good way of picking up on concerns over teaching (i.e. some issues regarding the teaching of BLGY2192 were raised during interviews with students). Therefore, it is unclear whether students get to see and understand improvements? How often is this discussed as a School? How is good practice shared?</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 / N
21.	Was the progression and award guidance provided sufficient for you to act effectively as an External Examiner?	Y / N
22.	Did you receive appropriate programme documentation for your area(s) of responsibility?	Y / N
23.	Did you receive appropriate module documentation for your area(s) of responsibility?	Y / N
24.	Did you receive full details of marking criteria applicable to your area(s) of responsibility?	Y / N
25.	Were you provided with all draft examination papers/assessments?	Y / N
26.	Was the nature and level of the assessment questions appropriate?	Y / N
27.	Were suitable arrangements made to consider your comments on assessment questions?	Y / N

28.	Was sufficient assessed work made available to enable you to have confidence in your evaluation of the standard of student work?	Y / N
29.	Were the examination scripts clearly marked/annotated?	Y / N
30.	Was the choice of subjects for final year projects and/or dissertations appropriate?	Y / N
31.	Was the method and standard of assessment appropriate for the final year projects and/or dissertations?	Y / N
32.	Were the administrative arrangements satisfactory for the whole process, including the operation of the Progression and Awards Board?	Y / N
33.	Were you able to attend the Progression and Awards Board meeting?	Y / N
34.	Were you satisfied with the recommendations of the Progression and Awards Board?	Y / N
35.	Were you satisfied with the way decisions from the School Special Circumstances meeting were communicated to the Progression and Awards Board?	Y / N
<p><i>Please use this box to provide any additional comments you would like to make on the questions above:</i></p> <p>I was particularly pleased that sufficient assessed work was made available to enable me through a variety of media to have confidence in my evaluation of the standard of student work.</p>		

#### Other comments

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

I would like to emphasise that I have seen improvements in standards, assessments and feedback during my term as External Examiner and am confident that staff take an active interest and care in providing first class degree programmes, which the students clearly benefit from. This despite a backdrop of large class sizes in some instances and limited resources. Any comments/suggestions I have made this year have been minor.

I would recommend innovative ways of creating more interactions with staff and students to develop relationships that might improve teaching, learning and feedback. For the latter, one way might be to raise the profile of student reps in order to better engage students more generally with module evaluation so that they can see the direct benefits of their contributions. Whilst I appreciate it is sometimes difficult to achieve better relationships with a large number of students, I believe a focus on the student culture within the Faculty would help students to feel more valued, supported and a sense of place, particularly with a growing recognition of mental health issues among young people.

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

Title and Name of Examiner:

Subject(s):

Ecology, Zoology (and programme variants)

Programme(s) / Module(s):

BSc Zoology – all programme variants  
 BSc Zoology in Relation to Medicine and Veterinary Science  
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 MBIol, BSc Ecology and Environmental Biology (Integrated Masters) – all programme variants

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

MBiol/ BSc

Title and Name of Responder:

Position\*:

Programme Leader Ecology and Conservation Biology &amp; Zoology

Faculty / School of:

School of Biology

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**

External examiner comment: Innovation and good practice in terms of some refreshed subject matter as part of ongoing module/programme improvements. I am satisfied with the examination processes and standards and note care and scrutiny in this area. The students are stretched academically and rigorously assessed, using a full range of methods, leading to an excellent student experience.

Response: We would like to thank the external examiner's recognition and support for the continuing improvement to our programmes as a result of recommendations and we appreciate recognition of the varied ways in which students are assessed.

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

External examiner comment: There have been general improvements on how academics agree upon marks for final year projects, in particularly the justifications they use in relation to the marking criteria.

Response: We are pleased that the examiner has noticed an improvement in marking consistency. This reflects improvements in our mechanisms and continuing to stress the importance of adhering to the marking criteria.

**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:

N/A

**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:

External examiner comment: Considerable improvements to modules/programmes, in particular improvements to modules in terms of both content refreshment and standardisation of assessment. There is now greater harmony across programmes using a variety of assessment types and mostly rooted in effective marking criteria. There is more care and attention paid to Learning Outcomes, joint-marking/training and student feedback. Overall, staff

deliver a first class standard of degree programme, often with limited resources and large class sizes, to equip graduates with the skills they require to flourish in industry and/or academia. Staff pay heed to criticism and suggestions in a positive manner and are quick to make improvements in a rapidly changing HE sector.

Response: We thank the examiner for recognition of our continued efforts to maintain standards in the light of changes in the HE sector and the impact this has had on the quality of our teaching and assessment. We appreciate the examiner's support of our efforts in the face of limited resources and large class sizes that are typical of the Ecology and Zoology degree programmes.

## 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:

External examiner comment: The programme structures, design, aims and intended learning outcomes are excellent. I acknowledge that some academics do very well with the limited resources they have to manage large class sizes in some modules, although clearly it is preferable to have smaller classes in the 2nd and 3rd year.

Response: Again we thank the examiner's recognition of our excellent programme delivery whilst dealing with limited resources and large class sizes. Several modules in the Ecology and Zoology programmes are very popular across the School, but also with intake from outside the Faculty. We note that large class sizes can impede innovation in delivery and assessment of teaching, but we feel this has been achieved in particular with the Level 3 Advanced Topics modules.

External examiner comment: Much of the teaching is research-led, which is widely acknowledged and appreciated by students. Students can also see the potential career pathways as a result. As stated in previous years, I encourage academics to not only teach the current 'paradigm', but perhaps make it explicit how their research contributes or even challenges this. This would potentially encourage more critical thinking.

Response: We have been able to address the examiner's recommendations to some extent within the Level 3 Advanced Topics modules, but refer to the large class sizes at Level 2 in particular that have proven to be more challenging in this respect. Nevertheless, as part of our efforts to refresh content, we will continue to look at ways in which more of our modules can encourage critical thinking.

## 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:

External examiner comment: I have observed improvements to ILOs and assessments across the board. I continue to encourage diversity of assessment types and I recommend a greater focus on problem solving assessments (although acknowledge this is not always possible in large class sizes). There should be a move towards smaller classes in later stages of the degree programmes.

Response: As stated elsewhere we appreciate the recognition that large classes sizes pose in terms of diversity of assessment, but we have made most progress in this aspect in the Level 3 Advanced Topics modules, as noted by the external examiner in previous reports.

External examiner comment: I have observed cohort effects in terms of overall performance and marks, which can't be explained by any significant changes to the programmes. The students are stretched and rigorously assessed to a very high academic standard. Overall, this leads to an excellent student experience.

Response: We are careful to examine module marks in order to eliminate any systemic effects, but agree that for the most part any anomalies can be explained by the cohort.

External examiner comment: Overall there appears to be better student involvement with module evaluation. However, they don't get to see it. Nor do External Examiners, which would be a good way of picking up on concerns over teaching (i.e. some issues regarding the teaching of BLGY2192 Experimental Design and Analysis were raised during interviews with students). Therefore, it is unclear whether students get to see and understand improvements? How often is this discussed as a School? How is good practice shared?

Response: We discuss issues in teaching at annual staff away days, but also on a more ad hoc basis as the need arises and in particular when we see module feedback. The student voice and better communication about their feedback and module evaluation are key aspects being addressed among teaching and support staff in the Faculty this year.

## 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:*

No issues raised, the external examiner was satisfied with all questions.

## Other comments

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

External examiner comment: I would like to emphasise that I have seen improvements in standards, assessments and feedback during my term as External Examiner and am confident that staff take an active interest and care in providing first class degree programmes, which the students clearly benefit from. This despite a backdrop of large class sizes in some instances and limited resources. Any comments/suggestions I have made this year have been minor.

Response: We thank the examiner's continued recognition and support of the improvements we have made during time.

External examiner comment: I would recommend innovative ways of creating more interactions with staff and students to develop relationships that might improve teaching, learning and feedback. One way might be to raise the profile of student reps in order to better engage students more generally with module evaluation so that they can see the direct benefits of their contributions. I believe a focus on the student culture within the Faculty would help students to feel more valued, supported and a sense of place, particularly with a growing recognition of mental health issues among young people.

Response: The examiner has picked up on an important point that this year we are striving to improve with specific efforts to enhance the students' voice and the recognition of their contribution to issues and improvements with our programmes (see also response to Qu. 17-19 above).