

The University of Leeds
EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2018-19

QAT Received 05/07/2019

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):

Pharmacology

Programme(s) / Module(s):

BSc Pharmacology – all programme variants
MBiol, BSc Pharmacology – all programme variants
BSc Pharmacology in Relation to Medicine

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

Please highlight areas of innovation or good practice within the programmes or processes you have been involved with in this box.

Once again, the administration surrounding the processes has been excellent. I have been provided, both beforehand and during the visit, with the relevant information and documentation that made the job as easy as possible. Many thanks to those all those involved.

There are a good number of highlights across the programmes that show good practice and excellent opportunities for students. The programme structure is clear and delivers an exciting range of opportunities for the students, including clear examples of research-led teaching. The programmes are reviewed frequently and adapted where necessary to ensure appropriate structure and content for the students. There is a good range of assessments. The programmes are very much appreciated by the students, along with other aspects of the provision such as the support with careers.

I have commented in a previous report on the high quality of the practical components of the course. These are real highlights and I would once again comment on the excellent opportunities for students throughout the course and in particular in the final-year projects, particularly the experimental projects. These projects provide access for the students to active research laboratories using modern techniques and provide real insights for the students about research careers. The quality of the projects is, more often than not, reflected in the reports generated by the students. The assessment of these projects was clear and there was good use of marking rubrics and useful comments by the markers that allowed a good understanding of how the mark(s) had been derived. In other assessed work there was evidence of consistent and appropriate marking with comments allowing an understanding of why a particular mark had been awarded. With a few exceptions (see below), the distribution of marks was relatively consistent between modules and in-line with my own and other institutions.

The awarding panel meeting was robust, allowing discussion where required. The criteria for the award/classification of degrees were clear and where there were borderline cases I was provided with the relevant documentation relating to the borderline cases before the meeting, enabling me to carefully consider each case. Discussion of these cases at the panel meeting was appropriate and fair. There was a sensible distribution of awards across the categories and these seemed consistent with those at my own institution.

Please note that I have also commented on aspects of the programmes following a visit in March of this year and that information can be considered alongside this.

Enhancements made from the previous year

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

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

Semester one (previously communicated)

BMSC2120 has shown a progressive drop in the average mark over the past three years. In addition, the coursework average was 74.7% versus an examination average of 55.5%. This is not consistent with the pattern in other modules. Furthermore there were a higher number of fails (13%) compared to other modules.

The classification distribution looked a little unusual in FOBS1125. In particular, there was a relatively high number of fails and a high number of thirds, including in coursework. To some extent this aligns with comments made by the students about some difficulties with this module

There had been an issue with marking on BMSC314001 (Advanced Scientific Skills). Apparently the initial marking of one (process-type) question had been completed by Ph.D. students or postdocs. Fortunately moderation by the module convenor has detected discrepancies and all scripts had been remarked by the module convenor. Although I understood that this remarking had resulted in marks for some scripts being increased, I only looked at a small number and in these the marks had been significantly reduced. One example that I focused on, to try and understand the process, had originally received a mark of 69.5% but on the remark had been awarded 38%. This obviously resulted in the student's mark moving from a first-class to a fail. It was difficult to understand how such a discrepancy had occurred despite a very reasonable marking scheme for the question. Unfortunately both marks were visible to the student. I did have the opportunity of meeting with the module convenor, which was helpful. They were able to explain the process more thoroughly and although I could see where difficulties might arise, it was still a little difficult to fully understand how such a large discrepancy had occurred. One positive aspect here is that the moderation process or oversight of the marking did detect a problem. On a general point, a review of procedures, particularly relating to the use of Ph.D. students and postdocs for marking might be worthwhile, especially for work contributing to degree classification. This should double-check that training and moderation is appropriate. I appreciate the difficulties of excessive marking loads and the often lack of recognition for performing this well. However, it would be rather unfortunate if similar instances of inappropriate marks either had or could slip through.

Semester two

The marks distribution in the second-year module, BMSC2223 (Neuropharmacology) was a little unusual. There was a surprisingly low proportion of 1st class marks (3/109 students) and this contrasted markedly with other modules, including other Year 2 modules. This should be addressed to ensure that the cohort of students taking this module are not unfairly penalised. I know that the programme/module leads are aware of these issues, have considered their origin and have plans to ensure that the same issues do not arise in the next run-through.

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

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

As commented on in my previous report, the programme structure is well-designed to deliver clear ILOs across areas relevant both to the discipline and to the future employment of graduates. The ILOs are assessed appropriately by a good range of assessment formats. The subject-specific material is relevant and students are very-well supported in developing both an understanding of this material and important transferable skills. There is clear progression within the programmes and both the range and level of material is entirely appropriate for the degree programmes. There are strong practical elements within the course that provide excellent opportunities for students to develop good technical and analytical skills.

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

There is very good evidence of research-led teaching. This is reflected in many taught components of the course and particularly at Year 3 level, where material is often cutting-edge and related to research interests of the staff. The final-year projects are a real highlight, providing opportunities for students to engage with active research groups, addressing current issues and using techniques relevant to research environments. For those students undertaking literature-based projects, these are focused on research-level problems, again reflecting research-led teaching.

14.	Does the programme form part of an Integrated PhD?	Y / 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?	Y / 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
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Please comment on the value of, and the programme's ability to meet, PSRB requirements here:

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>Student performance spanned across the degree classifications. The distribution of awards, both within individual modules and across the programmes was consistent with my own institution and others that I have seen. Across the range of modules that I considered, both in Semester 1 and Semester 2, there was evidence of excellent student performance, providing evidence of good teaching. This aligned with general comments from students during a visit in March. The range of assessments was good, allowing students to show knowledge and skills aligned to the ILOs. Marking was generally clear on the assessments, with the use of both rubrics and comments in the final-year projects being particularly clear. There was evidence that the moderation process is effective in identifying issues around marking and mark distribution.</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>There was, as with all such courses, a range of academic standards demonstrated by both the mark distributions and consideration of individual pieces of work. Consideration of individual pieces of work demonstrated cohesion between the quality of the work, the comments recorded and the mark awarded. There were clearly some outstanding students on the programmes as reflected by the final awards. These students demonstrated a depth of understanding across a range of areas. Again, the quality of work within the final year projects is to be commended. The programmes are designed to deliver students well-prepared for further education, research and employment and for the majority of students, this will certainly be the case. The quality of students is certainly in-line with those at my own institution.</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><i>Previously communicated</i></p> <p>During my visit in March and meeting with students from across the years, there was some discussion about differences in marking, perhaps with a focus on Year 2 Topics in Pharmacology and Year 3 Inherited Disorders. There was some discussion about the ease of access to first class marks between presentations and reports in the Year 3 module. Assessments in the Year 3 Advanced Topics module were also highlighted. There was discussion about discrepancies in marking and expectation, along with variability for the antimicrobials component.</p> <p>Whilst the students also appreciated the feedback, it was felt that more individualised feedback on formative assessments (rather than class feedback) would be particularly helpful.</p> <p>I fully appreciate that there is sometimes a balance between providing the level and speed of feedback that students would like with what is achievable given the resources available. We have similar issues at my own institution and try to deal with this as best we can, including managing student expectations.</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>		

Other comments

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

Name of School and Head of School (or nominee)

Title and Name of Examiner:

Subject(s):

Pharmacology

Programme(s) / Module(s):

BSc Pharmacology – all programme variants;
MBiol, BSc Pharmacology – all programme variants;
BSc Pharmacology in Relation to Medicine.

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

MBiol / BSc

Title and Name of Responder:

Position*:

Programme Leader for Pharmacology

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

We thank _____ for the positive comments on our good practice which highlighted clear examples of research-led teaching, the high quality of the practical components and the clear & robust assessment.

Response to Enhancements made from the previous year

No comments were made by the external examiner in this box.

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:

FOBS1135 (*n.b.* we assume report erroneously stated FOBS125 but meant FOBS1135) was in its first year and had various issues which have since been addressed by the parent School (MCB) and by the module team. In particular, the VLE will be restructured so that it is in a similar format to BMSC areas; lecturers have been asked to limit the content delivered and to ensure that it is at foundation level (particularly those lecturers highlighted in the student feedback); in light of the experience gained during the first run of the module last year, learning objectives for lectures have been modified for cases where, in practice, too much content was suggested in the Task & Finish Group that devised the module.

The examination for **BMSC2120** has been made more difficult in recent years, by replacing approximately 10 questions from the 50 question exam script that proved too easy, attracting a pass rate of >85%. This prompted a near 10 mark drop in the average scores of the class. This change occurred in the academic session 2016/17: and the more difficult paper standard has been in place since that time, with again the questions being refreshed disproportionately focusing on those that fail to discriminate between students of different ability. The in class coursework is also challenging, but the students can collaborate to complete it and have one week to complete it. The difference in mark for coursework vs exam reflects this.

The issue with the marking of BMSC3140 was highlighted by the programme leader to the external examiner in March (this module is taken by all BMSC students). The original first marking of the scripts by postgraduates was deemed inaccurate by the module manager during the check-marking stage. Consequently, the module manager re-marked all the scripts prior to the internal examination board so that the students got the correct marks. Although, as mentioned by _____, this demonstrated that the check-marking system works, the original erroneous marks were written in pen and left on the scripts which caused confusion when they were later viewed by students. In future, postgrad training will be enhanced and the postgrads will initially mark a few scripts each, which will then be check marked by the module manager so that any discrepancies can be fed back to the postgrad markers before the remaining scripts are marked.

The issue with the marking of BMSC2223 was discussed at the internal examination meeting and the outcome was highlighted by the programme leader to the external examiner. The assessment of BMSC2223 has been 100% essay-based, in contrast with equivalent modules which are usually 50-50 MCQ/essay. We believe that this makes the assessment susceptible to “question-spotting” and that this year many students struggled to produce two good essay answers. The module team have agreed to alter the examination format so that it is now 50-50 MCQ/essay.

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:

We thank the external examiner for the positive comments on the programme structure and ILOs, and we are pleased to note that there is very good evidence of research-led teaching.

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:

We thank the external examiner for these positive comments on the alignment of our ILOs and their assessment. It is good to have confirmed that the range of student performance is in line with other institutions and that our students are well-prepared for further education, research and employment.

The informal feedback given by the external examiner following _____ meeting the student reps in March is in line with what students have reported directly through the staff-student forum where we have minutes detailing actions taken.

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:

We thank the external examiner for these positive response to the questions.

Other comments

Response to items included in the ‘Other Comments’ section of the report

N/A