

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, School of Molecular and Cellular Biology

Subject(s):

Biological Sciences/ Cell Biology of Human Disease

Programme(s) / Module(s):

BSc Biological Sciences – all programme variants;
MBiol, BSc Biological Sciences (Integrated Masters) – all programme variants;
BSc Biological Sciences (Biotechnology with Enterprise) – all programme variants;
MBiol Biological Sciences (Biotechnology with Enterprise) (Integrated Masters) – all programme variants;
BSc Cell Biology of Human Disease.

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.

The programmes offer students an interesting, varied and challenging programme of study. Students clearly value this, and they voiced a strong sense of belonging to a community within the School.

The introduction of the Taught Education Database (TED) as a means to record component assessment marks is a very useful advance that enables analysis of module statistics and student performance.

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 would like to commend the programme and administrative teams for the streamlining of processes this year which meant that there were enhancements in the timeliness of receipt of appropriate programme and module documentation, and there were improved administrative arrangements for the whole process, including the operation of the Awards Board.

During the EE visits, it was much better to have the use of a larger room where scripts for the different modules/assessments could be easily found and accessed. There was also improved provision of printouts of marking criteria for key assessments, including for project elements.

This year I felt there was better use of the first visit of the year, which enabled EEs to view the student posters and to spend more time with a greater number students.

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

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

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

My impression is that the programme structure functions well in leading students through a strong research-led curriculum with a suitable capstone project experience. The aims and intended learning outcomes are suitably extensive and span an appropriate level of knowledge, understanding, and associated technical and transferable skills.

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)

As I commented last year, it is clear that the curriculum is informed by research in the School, and this is a very positive aspect of the programmes. Of particular note, the final year projects enable students to have an authentic experience of biological research, and the ATU components provide content linked to a variety of research areas.

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:

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:

16.	Is the programme accredited by a Professional or Statutory Regulatory Body (PSRB)?	Y
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Please comment on the value of, and the programme's ability to meet, PSRB requirements here:

The MBIol programmes have Advanced Accreditation from the Royal Society of Biology which forms a valuable external badge of excellence. My perception is that the programme continues to meet the necessary requirements.

Assessment and Feedback

17.	Does the programme design clearly align intended learning outcomes with assessment?	Y
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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.

There is a suitable range of different assessment methods in use, and I found good alignment of the methodology chosen with the particular ILOs. Overall I think that the design and structure of assessments allow students to demonstrate attainment of the relevant ILOs, both those related to knowledge and those which are more skill-based.

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

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 would rate the overall academic standards demonstrated by students as high. They compare very favourably to those I have seen at my own institution and as external examiner elsewhere. My impression is of a strong student cohort, who show very good performance in all areas relevant to Biological Sciences.

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

During my first visit of the year, I heard from students taking the BIOL3305 module, that the Paper Summary exam which carries 25% of the module marks, and in which students are required to write a missing abstract, had been the same one as that set in AY 15/16 which had been available to students on the VLE beforehand as an example. While presumably all students had similar access to this information and hence none were disadvantaged, the value of the assessment was surely significantly diminished. I would urge tighter oversight going forward, such that module managers are required to double-check that they are not reusing assessments that students already have access to.

The commentary on the BIOL3306 Project mark sheets was quite variable in terms of length and quality. These ranged from no commentary at all to in-depth, constructive comments. All markers should be aware of the need to provide their individual comments – this is particularly important where students are borderline cases – so I would suggest further reinforcement of this point may be necessary.

For the Literature Review Extension Exercise, I would recommend changing the title on the marking rubric to make it clear that it applies to this exercise, in order to avoid unnecessary confusion.

With regard to module BIOL3999, I noted that the marking was done using an outdated AY17/18 marksheet which had incorrect component weightings and mark components, which must have made marking confusing and introduced potential for errors. I would ask the team to review processes to ensure that all markers receive the correct marksheets and related information.

Again with module BIOL3999, there was considerable variability in the level of marker commentary to justify the marks awarded, and I would ask that renewed efforts are made to ensure all markers justify their marks. In addition, I found an example where it was not clear that the two markers had marked independently – the single mark sheet that was available stated that the markers had agreed the mark. Markers should be made aware that they must reach and record their own assessment of the work, prior to any discussions take place.

In module BIOL5382M, the extended research project for MBiol students, I found an instance where there was no marker commentary from either marker, and hence there was no explanation to justify the awarded marks. Again, all markers should be made aware of the requirement to provide suitable feedback that provides clear justification of the marks awarded.

I noted that in the BIOL3215 Cancer Biology module all students gained 100% for the presentation component of the module. While this assessment has a low weighting (5% of module), I would question whether it is sufficiently discriminatory if all students gain maximum marks, and I would encourage review of the marking criteria to find ways to make it a little more challenging.

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?	N
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:

Regarding question 29: Exam scripts were well annotated and markers should be commended for this. However, I noted that there were examples of missing or unhelpful comments for some projects - see comments after section 19 above.

Regarding question 34: I was pleased to learn that the programme team have discussed the idea of conducting an anonymous Awards Board and while this has not yet been adopted, I would encourage continued reflection on the advantages which would be offered by this in terms of providing the *perception*, from the outside, of the highest level of impartiality to interested parties (such as students and their families).

Regarding question 35: As mentioned in last year's report, in order to provide clearer guidance to the Awards Board, I believe it would be helpful for recommendations from the School Special Circumstances committee to include an indication of the level of support e.g. whether this relates to mild, significant or severe circumstances. I have provided the Exams Officer with information, based on procedures at my own institution, on how such structured recommendations can then be translated through to different forms of support, and hope that this may be a helpful prompt for further discussion on this topic in the School.

Other comments

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

I appreciate the efforts made with regard to marking rubrics for the project reports, but wondered whether it may be advantageous to use a unified marking rubric for all project reports in BIOL3306, regardless of whether the project is lab-based or literature review since it is the same module with the same ILOs being assessed.

While the first visit in the year proved much more useful this year with a valuable opportunity to meet with students, it could be further enhanced by allocating significantly more time for the poster session with students. This would enable EEs to view a greater number of posters and have discussions with more students – the time this year was taken up mainly with discussions with student reps, which was very useful, but it would be good to have time to speak with both reps and meet poster presenters.

I found that on my visits this year the orientation information provided was much clearer than in the preceding year, and I thank the teaching and administrative staff for ensuring this was the case. An addition enhancement for the future would be the provision of a printout of the broadsheet.

Name of School and Head of School (or nominee)

Title and Name of Examiner:

Subject(s):

Biological Sciences/ Cell Biology of Human Disease

Programme(s) / Module(s):

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BSc Biological Sciences (Biotechnology with Enterprise) – all programme variants;
MBiol Biological Sciences (Biotechnology with Enterprise) (Integrated Masters) – all programme variants;
BSc Cell Biology of Human Disease.

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

MBiol / BSc

Title and Name of Responder:

Position*:

Programme Leader (Biological Sciences, Biotechnology with Enterprise)

Faculty / School of:

Faculty of Biological Sciences, School of Molecular & Cellular 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. 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 are particularly pleased that _____ notes students' strong sense of belonging to the School, in addition to _____ positive comments about the quality of our programmes, and the introduction of the new results database.

Response to Enhancements made from the previous year

We have worked hard during the year to respond to the suggestions made by our External Examiners in 2018 for improvements to the processes relating to External Examiners' visits, and are delighted that feedback highlights the progress made, and that the facilities and procedures are now appropriate.

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:

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 are pleased to note that _____ highlights the contribution of Advanced Topic modules and final year projects to the research-led ethos of our 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:

We are pleased to note that our overall academic standard and assessment methodologies are considered good.

_____ raises a small number of individual issues:

We will ensure that there is no repetition of the incident where a past paper, which had been available to students for practice purposes on the VLE was reused for an exam.

We note _____ comments on the variability of the length and quality of feedback on projects on BIOL3306, BIOL3399 and BIOL5382M. We will remind markers of the importance of providing comprehensive feedback which explains and justifies the mark awarded.

BIOL3215 (Cancer Biology): _____ noted that all students gained the full 5% mark for one of the assessments. We realise that there was an error in the programme catalogue: this mark is for *participation* in a seminar, rather than for a *presentation* (the error has been corrected). The purpose of allocating this small portion of the module mark to the seminar is to ensure that students prepare adequately and attend, and the fact that the overwhelming majority of students were awarded the mark would suggest that it fulfils that purpose. However, we agree that the mark is not discriminatory (being either 0 or 5%), and will consider whether there is an effective mechanism for providing a more varied mark for participation.

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 are pleased that our efforts to ensure that exam scripts are clearly annotated have been noted.

We will continue reflections regarding the anonymisation of Exam Boards.

_____ suggestions regarding the possible 'grading' of mitigating circumstances as an aid to discussions at Exam Boards has generated discussion at Faculty level, however no change to current policy has been implemented. Several factors are at play here, not least that the Faculty's current approach is the one used University-wide. Furthermore, those involved in special circs within the School also feel that (i) it is not possible to directly correlate specific circumstances and the level to which a student's performance has been adversely impacted, and (ii) given the limited options we have for exercising discretion/ consideration, such a system would not be likely to change present outcomes.

Other comments

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

We note _____ request to spend longer at the poster session during _____ visit in May. We will incorporate this into the schedule. We will also look at providing a printed copy of the broadsheet for _____ visit during next year's exam boards.

We note _____ suggestion that we design a unified marking rubric for both laboratory-based and literature projects on BIOL3306. This is certainly something that can be discussed. However, project marking rubrics are agreed at Faculty level to ensure consistency of marking of projects across all Schools, so this suggestion will need to be discussed at faculty rather than School or programme level. We have raised this with the Faculty Director of Student Education for consideration.