

The University of Leeds
EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2018-19

QAT Received 07/08/2019

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 & Cellular Biology

Subject(s):

Microbiology

Programme(s) / Module(s):

BSc Microbiology – all programme variants;
BSc Medical Microbiology – all programme variants;
MBiol, BSc Microbiology (Integrated Masters) – all programme variants;
BSc Microbiology in Relation to Medicine.

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.

The timetabling and management of the final year research project module is excellent. The students have time to focus on their project work and writing their dissertations without the distraction of other assessments and exams.

The depth of subjects studied in the final year advanced topic units (ATUs) is impressive, with a range of topics being covered in great detail.

Enhancements made from the previous year

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

Can't comment – first year as external examiner.

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

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.

The Microbiology programmes are well structured to produce an in-depth education in Microbiology. From year one it is clear that these students are studying Microbiology rather than any sort of foundation that can lead to different end points. Together with the core microbiology modules there is a good range of additional modules, including genetics, cell biology and physiology, all of which have a microbiology focus. There is also a good balance of skills-based and academic modules with appropriate learning outcomes and assessments in each case. The teaching of molecular biology and omics seems to be particularly good. Virology teaching is noticeably strong and this obviously plays to the strengths and interests of the teaching staff. Bacteriology teaching is more medically oriented and is somewhat lacking from the final year ATUs, while there is very little mycology throughout – hence the programme lacks some breadth of study. The research project module is excellent and can provide the students with the opportunity to experience life in an active research lab.

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)

It is clear that the ongoing research in the Faculty, and in particular the virology research, informs a good deal of teaching and assessment in the programmes being looked at. This includes the wide range of final year project topics available to the students and the fact that many of them get to experience working in a research lab. For example, innate immunity, RNA viruses and their evolution, RNA metabolism and virus structure are all incorporated in detail in to the curriculum.

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:

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 good mix of assessment methods which are appropriate for the learning outcomes of the relevant modules – practical reports, data handling and oral presentations for skill-based modules, in course assessments and exams incorporating MRQs and essays for more academic modules. The MRQs stretch the students more than standard MCQs, and it is good to see essays being used throughout, ensuring that the students develop good writing skills. The marking schemes are well designed and generally well applied, but markers are very reluctant to identify excellent (80-89) and even very good (70-79) answers. The level of the student performance indicates that the quality of teaching is high.

The final year projects are of a high standard – both for the topics being studied and the final dissertations produced. However, I was surprised to see that the supervisor provided one of the marks. It was noticeable that more often than not this mark was higher than the second marker and in some cases there were significant discrepancies. The use of an independent first marker should be considered. Some dissertations had detailed comments throughout but some had none, and in those examples it was difficult to determine what the marks were being awarded for. For the literature projects the grant proposal extension is very tough and really stretches the students who will have had little experience of reading let alone writing a grant proposal.

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 / N

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:

Overall this cohort of Microbiology students demonstrated a strong academic performance – with one or two stand out candidates. Those students who had taken an industrial year were particularly strong in the final year. The quality of the exam answers was generally high and demonstrated a good ability to recall information, apply it to the question asked and write a well-structured essay. Where marks were low, it was often because the student had misread the question. The level of molecular detail provided for certain questions was particularly impressive. There was not too much evidence of external reading, but where there was, the marks reflected this.

The dissertations were also generally of a high quality, and were well structured. It was clear that the students received a good level of supervision and support from their supervisors. In the brief time I had to talk to students at their posters on my visit in May, I was impressed with the level of engagement and knowledge in their field of research and all of them seemed happy with the process. This was true for both lab-based and literature projects.

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

When looking at exam essays for several modules (eg MICR2121 & MICR2120), it was clear that the level of feedback given throughout the essays was somewhat variable. Comments at the end were generally detailed, but there were several examples of scripts where there were ticks the whole way through but still the student only scored ~ 58%. It would be useful to annotate the script in places to show what was missing from the answer (eg facts, depth of knowledge). In addition, some comments did not match the mark given eg “strong effort” = 61%. While it was obvious when an answer was a fail, other marks tended to cluster between 50 and 65, and marks above 70 were a rarity. The marking is rigorous and fair across the board, but tends to be on the harsh side. More use should be made of the full mark scheme to indicate when a student is excellent or exceptional (80+) rather than marking them so that they just scrape in to a first class mark.

The quality of model answers for exam essays that I looked at was very variable, ranging from one or two sentences to three sides of A4 which makes it difficult to compare marking across different essays. It would be useful to draw up a template for these to indicate what a good model answer should include.

With regard to evidence of outside reading in exams, some markers commented that no references were included to back up the information. For an exam-based essay this seems a bit of a tall order.

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>Please use this box to provide any additional comments you would like to make on the questions above:</i>		
No additional comments		

Other comments

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

As a new examiner to Leeds I found it difficult to keep up with the large amount of paperwork that came my way. In particular, I received duplicate copies of various documents either by email or as hard documents on my visits to Leeds. While I appreciate the detailed communication, I wonder if it would be possible to provide a tick list of core documents we should expect to receive, so that we can keep track of the paperwork and also recognise when something is missing.

Throughout the year I found the process of accessing the Leeds IT system impenetrable, and had several failed communications about what I needed to get on to it. This included a lack of communication at the Leeds end where nobody had approved my access. To this day, despite having a username and a password, I still can't access Minerva or the share drive, so all exam papers had to be sent to me in hard copy.

Having taken time to provide some comments on how a few specific exam essay questions, and/or their model answers had been worded, I was slightly disappointed that my points were by and large ignored by the relevant academics, with the stock response being "all markers are highly familiar with lecture content/subject". This is undoubtedly the case, but my comments were aimed at ensuring fairness in marking across the board rather than whether the markers knew the subject.

With regard to the programme content, the virology and molecular aspects are very strong, but it would be good to rebalance the bacteriology and particularly the mycology aspects of the teaching. This situation clearly reflects the strengths and interests of the teaching staff so it may be worth considering if additional teaching staff with bacteriology/mycology backgrounds could be employed.

Finally, I enjoyed the opportunity to talk to students at their poster presentations during my visit in May, and would like to have more time allocated for this.

Name of School and Head of School (or nominee)

Title and Name of Examiner:

Subject(s):

Microbiology

Programme(s) / Module(s):

BSc Microbiology – all programme variants;
BSc Medical Microbiology – all programme variants;
MBiol, BSc Microbiology (Integrated Masters) – all programme variants;
BSc Microbiology in Relation to Medicine.

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

MBiol / BSc

Title and Name of Responder:

Position*:

Associate Professor/Programme Leader for Microbiology

Faculty / School of:

Faculty of Biological Sciences, School of Molecular and 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 pleased that _____ recognised our efforts to spread the work load of our final year student across the two semesters, to allow focus on their final year projects. We are also pleased that _____ recognised our efforts to deliver high quality and in-depth teaching across a broad range topics through the Advanced Topic Units (ATUs).

No specific comments requiring a response were made.

Response to Enhancements made from the previous year

_____ was not acting as external examiner in the previous year, thus, no comparison was possible.

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:

No urgent matters were identified.

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:

As this was the first year _____ acted as external examiner, only questions 1-3 are relevant.

_____ states _____ was not provided with the report of the previous external examiner. This is regrettable, as this report would have provided _____ with information of changes made to the degree programme in the year prior to _____ taking on the examiner role. In future, the programme administrators will provide such documents when a new examiner is appointed.

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:

Overall, [redacted] was very complimentary of the Microbiology programme course structure across all years, commenting on the favourable balance of skill-based practical modules alongside academic content. The examiner noted the particularly strong molecular biology, 'omics and virology content throughout the programme, alongside modules providing microbiologically-orientated content relating to genetics, cell biology and physiology.

However, one specific comment was listed, to which we have responded:

The examiner commented that bacteriology content was somewhat lacking in the final year ATU courses, and there was little mycology throughout. In response to this point, we agree that inclusion of more bacteriology within final year ATU modules would result in increased balance of the microbiology programme. Steps to address this are underway, with plans to substitute one of the three ATU modules with a 20-credit course with sole focus on bacteriology, for possible introduction in the academic year 2020-2021. We also acknowledge the lack of mycology throughout the programme, and also agree that inclusion of increased content of this topic would improve the overall balance of the course. We will continue to seek out opportunities to add more mycology teaching where possible.

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 that [redacted] found that the various assessment methods implemented across the programme to be appropriate. We are also pleased that [redacted] considers the quality of final year projects to be high, and that the input of project supervisors was evident.

However, three specific comments were listed, to which we have prepared a response:

First, the examiner noted that the use of the project supervisor as one of the project assessors may introduce bias to the assessment, and the use of an independent marker should be considered. Our response to this comment is that this option has been considered in the past, and the outcome of school-wide discussions was that the input of the project supervisor was important due to the often highly specific and focussed topics of the projects, and that the intricacies of the work may not be appreciated by a non-expert marker. Our second assessor is independent of the project and we have a process outlined in the CoPA used across the Faculty regarding how we deal with discrepancies in marks between the two assessors. We believe this provides a rigorous approach to assessment of research projects.

Second, the examiner stated that some essays and dissertations included detailed comments from the markers, whereas others had none. In addition, the examiner stated that often the extent of tick markings did not correlate to overall score, making it difficult to appreciate where credit had been given. Our response to this is that while essay markers and project assessors are currently requested to fully and accurately annotate the work they mark indicating where credit is given, we will reinforce these instructions to help improve on the clarity of how marks are arrived at.

Third, the examiner stated that the quality of model answers for exam essays was very variable, making it difficult to compare marking across different essays. The examiner suggested that a template could be drawn up to indicate what a good model answer should include. This is a good suggestion and we will look to adopt this going forward.

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 comments were made by the external examiner.

Other comments

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

The external examiner made several comments, and we have prepared a response to each:

The examiner requested that due to the large quantity of paperwork that she was required to read and assess, that an inventory listing all relevant documents should be supplied, to allow [redacted] to more easily keep track of the paperwork and also recognise when something is missing. Our response is that this is a very sensible request, and an item list will be included along with all paperwork for the coming academic year.

The examiner stated that had poor access to the IT services at The University, as well as poor communication and actions from IT staff. Our response is that this situation is unacceptable and the necessary changes need to be implemented with immediate effect.

The examiner stated that with regard to the programme content, the virology and molecular aspects are very strong, but weaker on the topics of bacteriology and particularly mycology. While the examiner recognised this reflected the strengths and interests of the teaching staff within the school she suggested additional teaching staff could be recruited with bacteriology/mycology backgrounds. Our response to this is that we accept that increased content of these topics will improve the quality of the degree programme, and we will strive to increase this where possible (see earlier response).

Finally, the examiner stated enjoyed the opportunity to talk to students at their poster presentations during May visit, and would like to have more time allocated for this. Our response to this is that we will try to provide more time for this session in the current academic year.