



EXTERNAL EXAMINER ANNUAL REPORT FORM

Guidance notes are available to support the completion of this Report and is available at <http://learning.cf.ac.uk/quality/review/external-examiners/reports/>

	For completion by External Examiner:		
Name of External Examiner:	Dr Steven M Sait		
Home Institution / Employer of External Examiner:	School of Biology, University of Leeds		
Programme and / or Subjects Covered by this Report including any dissertation stage reports	MRes Bioscience (Stage 1 & 2) <i>MRes in Biosciences</i>		
Academic Year / Period Covered by this Report:	2015/16 Stage 2 and 2016/17 Stage 1	Date of Report:	23 rd March 2017

For completion by External Examiner in the spaces provided. Please extend spaces where necessary. **Please note this Form will be published online and should not make any reference to any individual students or members of staff.**

1. Programme Structure

Stage 1 of the Master of Research in Biosciences is well-designed and well-organised. It comprises a broad range of teaching methods and assessments, which are challenging for students and develop core scientific research skills. These include academic writing and critical analysis, experimental design, practical lab and field techniques and generic skills, such as giving presentations. Teaching methods include lectures, tutorials, seminars and workshops, as well as a high proportion of self-directed learning that is suitable for this level. The objectives of the programme are clearly aligned with the aims, learning outcomes and programme specifications as detailed in the programme handbook.

The administration of the assessments and the provision of feedback is generally very good. For all taught modules staff have developed a comprehensive and detailed set of marking criteria that clearly define the standards associated with a particular grade. Additionally, staff use a transparent process of mark moderation and adhere to the clear marking guidelines and assessment procedures for the most part. Hence, it is clear why a mark was awarded and how improvements could be made in most cases.

Stage 2 provides an excellent basis for training independent research scientists. The aims, learning outcomes and programme specifications are clearly outlined in the programme handbook. The research project is an exceptional opportunity for students to carry out research in research-active labs and provides excellent experience of what a PhD might involve. The wide range of projects available to the students enables them to do a project that is matched to their particular interests and plays to their strengths. The process of

designing a programme of hypothesis-driven research and presenting the research as a seminar is an especially valuable “real research” experience.

2. Academic Standards

The standards achieved by the students for Stage 1 and Stage 2 are high and are appropriate for an advanced programme. The standard of work is comparable with my own institution and with a similar programme I have examined in another institution. The quality of the dissertations was high and the oral presentations were very good; it was clear that the training in Stage 1 had prepared the students well. Their seminars were well-structured and presented with confidence. All the seminars were given on the same day and all students attended. This is a very good practice as the students benefit from seeing everyone else’s work. The standard across the cohort was high and the Stage 2 process did distinguish between students of differing abilities and there were outstanding pieces of work.

3. The Assessment Process

Across the Stage 1 modules the average marks and spread of marks are appropriate for teaching at this level and indicate that the students are being assessed appropriately and the range of marks properly reflects the relative abilities of the individual students. Importantly, there are no apparent systematic differences between modules that employ different assessments and sets of marking criteria. This year’s marks were affected to some extent by a cohort of students outside of the programme taking some of the modules. The quantity of comments and feedback is generally very good and it is clear that staff spend a great deal of time on this key aspect of the assessment process. A key part of Stage 1 is the grant proposal. Where appropriate a 3rd marker is used as an additional level of moderation should the two markers fail to agree a mark. This is very good practice. Following recommendations from last year, the 2nd marker now also includes a feasibility assessment for the grant proposal. As this is the basis of Stage 2 this makes an important and useful contribution to the assessment process.

The assessment methods for Stage 2 are appropriate and involve more than one marker. It was generally clear how marks were awarded because of the widespread and consistent use of the marking criteria, which has become standard practice among staff. It is clear to students and external examiners how a mark was arrived at and that the marking has been fair and appropriate. Annotation of the dissertations (for example, highlighting areas of strength or weakness) also helped in understanding how a mark was awarded, but this was patchier in its quantity and quality. The moderation of marks when differences are 10% or more is important and for the most part this works well. However, in some cases there was no evidence provided for the rationale for how final marks are agreed. For the most part this is not necessary, but there were some cases where the discrepancies were very large and I feel that some written justification is needed in these cases. This could be required should students appeal their final marks.

4. Year-on-Year Comments

The exam board meetings, including the provision of coursework, dissertations and associated materials (marking criteria, feedback forms, annotated work) for reviewing, was carried out in a well-organised and professional manner and the efforts of the staff involved are to be commended. It should be noted that the Stage 2 exam board happened at the same time as UG induction and so staff were under considerable additional pressure, particularly in the absence of dedicated administrative support. [This has since been put in place, which has helped a great deal with the external examining and exam board processes].

Access to Blackboard in order to view the dissertations at an early stage online was especially useful.

The widespread use of clear and unequivocal marking criteria, widely adopted since last year, has largely dealt with some inconsistency in marks awarded. Overall, the comments, feedback and the marks awarded are transparent for the students and examiners and they are closely aligned with the marking criteria. Of particular note are those staff who finely tune their mark/feedback by highlighting several categories of the marking criteria, which I found especially helpful. This is a highly commendable practice and I would encourage its widespread use.

A key part of Stage 1 is the grant proposal and there were some outstanding submissions. However, the level of input from individual supervisors was inconsistent and this showed in the quality of some of the proposals. I think an agreed minimum standard of supervisor input needs to be devised and adopted across the programme in terms of, for example, the number of meetings with students, provision of an existing grant proposal, and the level of formative feedback. Additionally, there are currently no marking criteria for the grant proposal and this may also lead to differences in marks and, of course, make it difficult to understand why marks were applied.

The mid-stage review of Stage 2 is an excellent opportunity for supervisors to check progress and staff should be commended for this. Programme staff may need to consider a process for when students are not making satisfactory progress by the mid-stage review, including clear and robust reporting of such instances, as there is currently no clear mechanism in place.

Students were overwhelmingly positive about the whole programme. Staff were easy to contact, quick to respond and quick to deal with any issues. The student:staff panel was very useful for raising and discussing issues and the staff should be commended for being very proactive about addressing any issues.

For Stage 1 it was felt that more guidance about progress being made and more clarity about expectations with respect to the different assignments/modules would have been helpful. It was acknowledged that the step up from the UG level to an advanced masters programme was inevitably going to be considerable.

Students felt the intensity of Stage 1 prepared them well for Stage 2. The standard of project supervision was very good and that the projects were well-resourced. Opportunities for inter-departmental projects were valued and students enjoyed being part of active research groups and they felt they had ownership of their projects. All of the students would like to do a PhD and some had already successfully secured a place. They all felt that the programme had increased their chances of being successful, which is the ultimate praise for the programme. The new cohort of students had the opportunity to meet last year's students and attend their seminars. This is extremely helpful for appreciating the expectations from the programme and staff should be commended for facilitating this.

5. Preparation / Induction Activity (for new External Examiners only)

N/A.

6. Noteworthy Practice and Enhancement

The research project provides an excellent foundation for a research-focused career in biosciences. Opportunities for inter-departmental projects are valued.

Marking is clear and closely aligned with detailed and thoughtfully-produced marking criteria. Moderation of marks is routinely applied when appropriate and is transparent. Early viewing of the dissertations using Blackboard was particularly helpful for the external examiners.

7. Appointment Overview (for retiring External Examiners only)

8. Annual Report Checklist

Please include appropriate comments within Sections 1-7 above for any answer of 'No'.

		Yes (Y)	No (N)	N/A (N/A)
Programme/Course Information				
8.1	Did you receive sufficient information about the Programme and its contents, learning outcomes and assessments?	X		
8.2	Were you asked to comment on any changes to the assessment of the Programme?	X		
Draft Examination Question Papers				
8.3	Were you asked to approve all examination papers contributing to the final award?			X
8.4	Were the nature, spread and level of the questions appropriate?			X
8.5	Were suitable arrangements made to consider your comments?			X
Marking Examination Scripts				
8.6	Did you receive a sufficient number of scripts to be able to assess whether the internal marking and classifications were appropriate and consistent?			X
8.7	Was the general standard and consistency of marking appropriate?			X
8.8	Were the scripts marked in such a way as to enable you to see the reasons for the award of given marks?			X
8.9	Were you satisfied with the standard and consistency of marking applied by the internal examiners?			X
8.10	In your judgement, did you have the opportunity to examine a sufficient cross-section of candidates' work contributing to the final assessment?			X
Coursework and Practical Assessments				
8.11	Was the choice of subjects for coursework and / or practical assessments appropriate?	X		
8.12	Were you afforded access to an appropriate sample of coursework and / or practical assessments?	X		
8.13	Was the method and general standard of assessment appropriate?	X		
8.14	Is sufficient feedback provided to students on their assessed work?	X		
Clinical Examinations (if applicable)				
8.15	Were satisfactory arrangements made for the conduct of clinical assessments?			X
Sampling of Work				
8.16	Were you afforded sufficient time to consider samples of assessed work?			X
Examining Board Meeting				

		Yes (Y)	No (N)	N/A (N/A)
8.17	Were you able to attend the Examining Board meeting?	X		
8.18	Was the Examining Board conducted properly, in accordance with established procedures and to your satisfaction?	X		
8.19	Cardiff University recognises the productive contribution of External Examiners to the assessment process and, in particular, to the work of the Examining Board. Have you had adequate opportunities to discuss the Programme and any outstanding concerns with the Examining Board or its officers?	X		
Joint Examining Board Meeting (if applicable)				
8.20	Did you attend a Composite Examining Board, i.e. one convened to consider the award of Joint Honours degrees?			X
8.21	If so, were you made aware of the procedures and conventions for the award of Joint Honours degrees?			X
8.22	Was the Composite Examining Board conducted according to its rules?			X

Please return this Report, preferably in a Microsoft Word format, by email to:

ExternalExaminers@cf.ac.uk

Your fee and expenses claim form and receipts, should be sent electronically to the above email address or in hard copy to:

External Examiners, Registry & Academic Services, Cardiff University, McKenzie House, 30-36 Newport Road, Cardiff, CF24 0DE