

EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT FORM (TAUGHT PROGRAMMES)



External Examiners are required to complete and submit Reports at least annually and within one month of the programme Examining Board.

Completed External Examiner Report Forms should be sent to:

ExternalExaminers@cardiff.ac.uk

Arrangements for the payment of fees and expenses will be made upon receipt of this Report Form and upon receipt in hard copy of a completed External Examiner Claim Form for Reimbursement of Fees and Expenses and expenses receipts. This Report Form and the associated Claim Form may be downloaded at:

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Please note that External Examiner reports are circulated widely in order that any necessary action can be taken. A copy of the final report of an External Examiner will also be passed to their successor.

Cardiff University prefers External Examiners to complete their Report Forms electronically and to submit them by email as indicated above. If, for any reason an External Examiner prefers to provide their report in hard copy it should be sent to *Mr. Clive Brown, Registry Officer, Registry, Cardiff University, McKenzie House, 30-36 Newport Road, Cardiff, CF24 0DE.*

**PAYMENT OF FEES CANNOT BE AUTHORISED UNTIL RECEIPT OF THIS COMPLETED FORM
AND THE ASSOCIATED CLAIM FORM**

Name of External Examiner: Prof. David Burslem

Institution: University of Aberdeen

Programme of study and subject(s) examined: Master of Research in Biosciences

Academic Year/Session to which this report applies: 2013/14

Freedom of Information Act

The University is a public authority and therefore subject to the Freedom of Information Act 2000. The University may therefore be required to publish the whole or parts of any reports and correspondence submitted by its External Examiners. The University also reserves the right to choose to publish the whole or parts of any reports submitted by its External Examiners.

SECTION A

1.1 Programme Structure

Comment upon the appropriateness of the structure and content of the programme in relation to its stated aims, learning outcomes and programme specification (if available).

The two-part structure of the programme provides students with a phased introduction to research skills and techniques prior to Part 2, which allows them to apply these techniques during the project period, which is appropriate to the stated aims, learning outcomes and programme specification. The content of the programme fulfils the intention to expose all students to a broad spectrum of research techniques in Biosciences before they specialise on a specific discipline within research groups. The students in the current cohort perceive that the content of the course on Research Techniques during Part 1(BIT002) is more heavily weighted towards research techniques in laboratory-based Bioscience disciplines (biochemistry, molecular biology, genetics etc) than field ecology, and that this may disadvantage students who lack a background in these disciplines relative to their peers. In my judgement this perspective fails to account for the necessity of “whole-organism” biologists to learn a spectrum of modern laboratory techniques in order to then understand and apply them during the project period, and in their future research careers. However, the course team may wish to consider ways in which assessment of components of this course could be adjusted to ensure that these two broad categories of student are challenged with unfamiliar techniques and approaches in an equitable way.

1.2 Comparability of Standards

Comment upon the comparability of the standards of the programme with similar programmes nationally and the performance of the students in relation to their peers on similar programmes. In those subject areas where a subject benchmark statement is available, have the students demonstrated achievement of the appropriate benchmark standard?

The Biosciences MRes programme at Cardiff attracts a cohort of talented and high quality students, which is maintained by rigorous recruitment and selection procedures. Inevitably the cohort is relatively small in size, but the programme is distinctive and field-leading, and these benefits would be diluted if the size of the cohort expanded significantly or the entrance threshold diminished. The programme is very challenging in terms of work-load and the academic standards expected by staff, and these high expectations are described clearly and understood by the students. I have no doubt that the standards of the programme are equivalent to, or higher than, similar programmes elsewhere in the UK. In general the course team provide exceptional academic support and feedback to students, which contributes to the strong performance of students in assessments.

1.3 The Examination Process

Comment upon the appropriateness of the assessment methods and balance between them (i.e. unseen written papers, essays/dissertations, orals, etc), the marking scheme, procedure for the classification of the award and the overall conduct and fairness of the examination and assessment processes.

As discussed in previous reports, the Part 1 course modules provide a rich variety of assessment formats, including essays, notes on research techniques, an exercise on public communication, poster and oral presentations, a grant proposal, and a mini-project. This accommodates the wide variety of learning styles that inevitably exists within the student population. As might be expected, the number of assessments differs between modules, although I am satisfied that the effort required to obtain the credits is approximately equal. On the other hand, in one instance this year (BIT010) the number of assessments differed between streams within a module, which may have led to an unbalanced distribution of effort between the student cohorts taking these alternate pathways (biostatistics vs bioinformatics). An outcome of this disparity is that one group of students (taking the biostatistics stream) received significant feedback on assessments throughout the module, while those taking the bioinformatics stream had received none for this component of the module. Having discussed these issues with the course team I understand the reasons for why this discrepancy occurred (it was unplanned), and I encourage them to develop a strategy to prevent its recurrence next year.

SECTION A (Continued)

1.4 How did procedures/arrangements compare this year with previous years? Have any or all of the recommendations made by you or your predecessor last year been actioned?

In general, procedures and arrangements were similar this year to previous years. One significant unintended difference was that room bookings for scheduled classes for MRes teaching were often in conflict with other courses and modules, resulting in double-booked teaching venues and significant inconvenience for students and staff. Having discussed this issue with the course team I am reassured that rooms had been booked long in advance by the course secretary, in which case the problem must lie with the central timetabling service that handles room bookings across all courses. I recommend that this issue should be resolved as a matter of urgency, and certainly in time for the next academic session.

The structure and content of the modules were similar to previous years, except that a new exercise on Time Management based around preparation of a GANTT chart (proposed by External Examiners last year) had been introduced. It was well received and highly commended by students. For a second year, module BIT010 (Data Handling and Statistics) was streamed, after an initial introductory period, into two groups, one focussing on biostatistics using the R platform (primarily for ecologists), and the other focussing on bioinformatics (primarily for those working with DNA or other sequence data). Both streams delivered effective teaching that was highly commended by some students, and fulfilled the learning objectives. However, I note that some aspects of the bioinformatics teaching suffered from logistical problems and inadequate academic support to students, and these issues require further consideration by the course team. Specifically, students reported that the lecturer had to leave some practical classes early because his teaching was double-booked, and demonstrators were not sufficiently prepared to cover in his absence; as noted above, there were conflicts over room bookings that resulted in confusion over teaching venues; access to super-computing resources was not delivered as planned; and some teaching assumed a higher level of understanding than generally existed within the class. The last point may have been exacerbated by the fact that some practical classes combined students from the Bioscience programme with others from a computing course (this fact was reported to External Examiners by students, but we were unable to verify it). These issues were all raised and discussed with the course team during the Examiners Meeting, and I am confident that they fully appreciate the problems and are developing a strategy to avoid them for the next academic year.

1.5 If this is your first year as External Examiner please comment upon whether the school induction activities (if applicable), External Examiner Handbook and other documentation provided helped you to fulfil your role and responsibilities as an External Examiner. Are there any ways in which the process could be improved?

N/A

1.6 Please give examples, if appropriate, of good or noteworthy practice in the following areas which you wish to draw to the wider attention of the University:

- (i) alignment of learning outcomes with assessment tasks;
- (ii) methods of enhancing consistency of marking;
- (iii) explicitness of information relating to assessment;
- (iv) other practice in the structure, delivery and assessment of the programme.

There are multiple instances of good practice that could be disseminated to the wider attention of the University; examples include:

Diversity of assessment methods and styles (as discussed above), providing opportunities for students with varying learning approaches to gain confidence and express potential. This includes examples of close matches between learning outcomes (eg to acquire competence in public communication of science) with assessment tasks (writing a newspaper article for a lay audience) in BIT011.

Quality of written feedback provided to students (all modules).

Provision of model answers for formative assessment of biostatistics (BIT010).

Mentoring and moderation of early career staff to ensure consistency of marking (BIT002).

1.7 If this is your final year as External Examiner please provide an overview of your period of office which may be passed on to your successor.

The Biosciences MRes programme was established 7 years ago, and therefore it was well-established by the time my period of office started. It benefits from a very committed core team of staff who share a vision and strong sense of ownership over the course. This strong course identity is also largely shared by the students, who generally actively select it for these attributes among equivalent courses available to them elsewhere. The course has evolved gradually during the last four years, driven by on-going critical examination by the course team, student feedback and External Examiner comments, but the balance between research and generic skills training in Part 1 and research projects in Part 2 has remained consistent. As with any course, there are examples of improvements that have emerged from on-going review over the last four years. These include changes to the structure and content of modules (particularly BIT010 Biostatistics, including the introduction of a bioinformatics component), the timing and style of assessment, and introduction of specific new elements (such as Time Management), and removal of others. I have been impressed by the readiness of the course team to consider comments and feedback from students and External Examiners, and to respond positively when they accept criticism. This has included time-consuming changes to the content of some modules and critical evaluation of the quality of academic support provided by specific supervisors. Thus the task of External Examiner has been greatly facilitated by the collegial atmosphere and the highly professional approach of the course team.

SECTION B

Please respond to the following questions by ticking the appropriate box. Please make appropriate comments if your answers are 'No'.

Programme/Course Information		Yes	No	N/A
2.1	Did you receive sufficient information about the programme/course contents, learning outcomes and assessments?	√		
2.2 Comments				
N/A				
Examination Question Papers		Yes	No	N/A
2.3	Were you asked to approve all examination papers contributing to the final award?			√
2.4	Were the nature, spread and level of the questions satisfactory?			√
2.5	Were suitable arrangements made to consider your comments?			√
2.6	Were you afforded access to a sample of in-course assessments?			√
2.7 Comments				
The course was based entirely on in-course assessment.				
Marking Examination Scripts		Yes	No	N/A
2.8	Did you receive a sufficient number of scripts to be able to assess whether the internal marking and classifications were appropriate and consistent?			√
2.9	Were the methods of assessment well balanced and fair? Did they reflect the programme's objectives?			√
2.10	Were examination/assessment procedures and the schemes for marking and classification correctly applied?			√
2.11	Were you satisfied with the standard and consistency of marking applied by the internal examiners?			√
2.12	In your judgement, did you have the opportunity to examine a sufficient cross-section of candidates' work contributing to the final assessment?			√
2.13	Were satisfactory arrangements made for you to conduct any necessary <i>viva voce</i> examinations?			√

2.14 Comments
N/A

SECTION B (Continued)

Coursework/Dissertations/Projects		Yes	No	N/A
2.15	Was the choice and assessment of coursework/dissertations/projects satisfactory?	√		
2.16	Is sufficient feedback provided to students on their assessed work?	√		

2.17 Comments
N/A

Clinical Examinations (if applicable)		Yes	No	N/A
2.18	Were satisfactory arrangements made for the conduct of clinical assessments?			√
2.19	Was the assessment of such work satisfactory?			√

2.20 Comments
N/A

Examining Board Meeting		Yes	No	N/A
2.21	Were you able to attend the Examining Board meeting?	√		
2.22	Was the Examining Board conducted properly and in accordance with established procedures?	√		
2.23	Were you asked to comment on any changes to the assessment of the programme?			√
2.24	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(s) of Study and any outstanding concerns with the Examining Board or its officers?	√		

Joint Examining Board Meeting (if applicable)		Yes	No	N/A
2.25	Did you attend a Composite Examining Board (i.e. one convened to consider the award of Joint Honours degrees)?			√
2.26	If so, were you made aware of the procedures and conventions for the award of Joint Honours degrees?			√
2.27	Was the Composite Examining Board conducted according to its rules?			√

2.28 Comments
N/A

Signed: _____ Date: 26 January 2014

Please return this report by email to: ExternalExaminers@cf.ac.uk

Your fee and expenses claim form, and any reports which cannot be emailed, should be sent to:
Mr. Clive Brown, Registry Officer, Registry, Cardiff University, McKenzie House, 30-36 Newport Road, Cardiff, CF24 0DE.