

ANNUAL QUALITY IMPROVEMENT REPORT 2015/16

Appendix 3: External Examiners' report

Undergraduate Biological Sciences

This appendix contains Course Director's/Year Leader's responses to 2015/16 External Examiners' comments and updates to actions from 2014/15 External Examiners' report (if applicable).

As Course Director/Year Leader please ensure you reflect on External Examiners' comments in the Course Review section. Please ensure that any actions to be taken in response to these comments have been recorded in your Annual Quality Improvement Report.

For support or advice please contact Ana Filipovic, Academic Quality Officer 'Standards', afilipovic@rvc.ac.uk, 01707666938

Collaborative Report

UG Biosciences, 2015/16 (Including BSc BiovetBiolog/CompPath/MSci)

Lead examiner: Professor Gary Baxter

Collaborating examiner(s): Dr Timothy Scase, Professor Alireza Fazeli

The Programme

Please comment, as appropriate, on the following aspects of the programme:

1.1 Course content

The undergraduate Biosciences programme is a suite of modular offerings leading to Bachelors (BSc) and integrated Masters (MSci) awards. The programme content is comprehensive in breadth, flexible in terms of student choice, especially in year 3, and the content is at the appropriate level for the awards at all stages of study. A particular strength of the programme is content development and delivery by academic experts. A particular feature that adds academic strength and contributes to student professional development and marketability is the strong practical research ethos, with increasing exposure to, and experience of, research methodologies, including library-based, bench and field-based techniques in all years. Reciprocal arrangement with Kings College London for third year modules to be undertaken by RVC students at KCL, and vice versa, seems to work very well.

Response from college requested: **NO**

Professor A.F

I completely agree with the lead examiner's comments.

COURSE DIRECTOR: Dr Charlotte Lawson

Course Director Response:

we would like to thank the external examiners for their positive comments regarding the RVC UG Biosciences programmes

Action Required:

Action Deadline:

Action assigned to:

1.2 Learning objectives, and the extent to which they were met

Module aims and learning objectives that we were able to access in online course materials are clear. The assessment processes provide good evidence that these objectives are met.

Response from college requested: **NO**

Professor A.F

I completely agree with the lead examiner's comments.

1.3 Teaching methods

An appropriately wide range of teaching and learning approaches is employed, including lectures, workshops/small group learning, guided self-directed learning, laboratory practicals and independent research projects. We would regard this pedagogical mix of approaches and teaching technologies as good practice. The commitment of teachers contributing to the programme is tangible and to be commended.

Response from college requested: NO

Professor A.F

I completely agree with the lead examiner's comments.

1.4 Resources (in so far as they affected the assessment)

We are not aware of any resourcing issues that have affected the assessment processes or outcomes. We would note that we had difficulty in accessing online materials at our visit on 4/5 July and it would be helpful if IT connectivity could be confirmed ahead of future visits. While not obviously affecting assessment, we noted that course-related information, including module outlines, schemes of assessment, course information and student guidance on various matters, are provided as online resources only. We found these difficult to navigate and we do wonder if students may benefit from having a printed handbook where essential course information for each year of study is compiled for ease of reference.

Response from college requested: YES

Professor A.F

I would like to highlight and thank the examination officer for his immense help and cooperation during our visit. The examination officer e-mail correspondences in advance of our visit were very useful and helpful to allow us to complete our task.

COURSE DIRECTOR: Dr Charlotte Lawson

Course Director Response:

We apologise for any difficulties encountered by the External Examiners in accessing online content and have discussed this with the eMedia and IT teams to ensure full connectivity to Eduroam and the RVC intranet in future. We acknowledge the concerns of the External Examiners that students might find the online material difficult to navigate and that they may benefit from a printed handbook and have discussed these concerns with the head of our eMedia team. The RVC is committed to a paper free curriculum and all new students are given an extensive induction by our eMedia team during their first weeks of study at the RVC and this is followed up with tutorial and workshop tasks that require use of the VLE. In addition, as students have access to their lecture notes and additional modular and non-modular information via the VLE they become familiar with the platform within a short space of time. Each cohort additionally has a designated "Student Learning Technologist", a peer who is able to direct students to the relevant information and interact with eMedia, course support staff, module, year and course leaders to ensure that relevant material is readily available and accessible.

The Learn team are currently working on improved signposting and searching of content – which will provide an easier way to locate information in a "just in time" basis instead of having to trawl through piles of paper. There are some specific actions they are working on at the moment:

- Involving students in reviewing curriculum content or RVC Learn (ongoing)
- Improved signposting of course or supplementary digital documentation
- Provide guide for students (and EE) with advice on navigating RVC Learn

Action Required:

Ensure that connections to wifi are functional prior to Examboard and provide straightforward guidance as to how to navigate VLE

Action Deadline:

03-Apr-2017

Action assigned to:

Charlotte Lawson, Ana Filipovic, Alistair Spark, Adam Osgood

1.5 Please provide any additional comments and recommendations regarding the Programme

Response from college requested: NO

Student performance

Please comment, as appropriate, on:

2.1 Students' performance in relation to those at a similar stage on comparable courses in other institutions, where this is known to you

The performance of students at each stage of the programme is comparable to what we would expect in general Biosciences programmes at institutions of comparable standing (i.e. Russell group universities) and Bioveterinary Sciences programmes at other veterinary schools. Approximately 60% of completing BSc Bioveterinary Sciences students, all the BSc Comparative Pathology and all the MSci Bioveterinary Sciences were awarded degrees in the First Class or Upper Second classes. This is a good achievement by the students against an assessment of very high standard.

Response from college requested: YES

Professor A.F

I completely agree with the lead examiner's comments.

COURSE DIRECTOR: Dr Charlotte Lawson

Course Director Response:

We thank the External Examiners for their comments regarding the comparable standards of our students compared to Russell Group and other institutions. We shall of course strive to maintain or exceed these in the next academic year.

Action Required:

Action Deadline:

Action assigned to:

2.2 Quality of candidates' knowledge and skills, with particular reference to those at the top, middle or bottom of the range

The quality of candidates' ability across the range is similar to what we would expect to see in other comparable institutions. The samples of assessed work that we surveyed (written examinations and projects) confirmed that students are appropriately positioned within their cohorts.

Response from college requested: NO

Professor A.F

I completely agree with the lead examiner's comments.

2.3 Please provide any additional comments and recommendations regarding the students' performance

Looking at the summary statistics of annual marks for final year BSc and MSci students, there is evidence of academic trajectory in the programme. This was raised by an internal examiner at the examination board. While the slope of trajectory from year 1 to year 3/4 may vary between cohorts, and could be determined to some extent by qualifications at entry (which we are unable to comment on), we did not feel that there is a particular issue of exit trajectory in the graduating cohort this year. We did note however, that BSc year 2 results show no upward trajectory for this cohort although their year 1 performance was at a slightly higher baseline than in previous cohorts.

We will be interested to monitor this in the years ahead.

Response from college requested: YES

Professor A.F

I completely agree with the lead examiner's comments.

COURSE DIRECTOR: Dr Charlotte Lawson

Course Director Response:

we thank the external examiners for their comments and agree that it will be important to monitor the progress of the current BSc2 (2015-16) as they progress to BSc3 (for example comparison of scores in 2016-17 module ICAs compared to 2014-15 and 2015-6)

Current BSc1 median scores appear similar to the BSc1 scores of the cohort graduating this year so we will additionally monitor their learning trajectory as they progress through BSc2 (e.g. via marks for BSc2 ICAs compared to 2015-6 and 2014-5)

Action Required:

Monitor the progress of the 2015-16 BSc2 as they progress to BSc3 (for example comparison of scores in 2016-17 module ICAs compared to 2014-15 and 2015-6)

Monitor 2015-16 BSc1 students' learning trajectory as they progress through BSc2 (e.g. via marks for BSc2 ICAs compared to 2015-6 and 2014-5)

Action Deadline:

01-May-2017

Action assigned to:

Course Director; Year 2 Leader; Year 3 Leader

Assessment Procedures

Please comment, as appropriate, on:

3.1 Assessment methods (relevance to learning objectives and curriculum)

Assessment methods are generally very appropriate and aligned to the learning objectives. There is a good variety of methods (written examinations, submitted work, presentations etc). The final year BSc/MSci project with associated presentations is an excellent vehicle for assessment of ability at this stage of the programme. Written examinations vary from module to module but permit good discrimination of the students' abilities. Situational and short-answer style questions requiring students to analyse or comment on data were generally very well composed. All papers rely heavily on the essay vehicle and there may be an over-reliance on this method, requiring a high level of staff effort for fair and consistent marking. The Board of Studies may wish to reflect on which learning outcomes are being specifically tested by essay and whether these outcomes, which may include conceptual understanding and knowledge integration, necessitate an essay component in every module/examination.

Response from college requested: **YES**

Professor A.F

I completely agree with the lead examiner's comments.

COURSE DIRECTOR: Dr Charlotte Lawson

Course Director Response:

We thank the External Examiners for their insight and will disseminate these for discussion to the Course Management Committee, in particular that the problem solving questions are well composed and that there may be over-reliance on essay style questions.

Action Required:

Action; Course director will present these comments for discussion by the BSc committee members at the Autumn CMC as part of the regular update on assessments

Action Deadline:

30-Nov-2016

Action assigned to:

Course Director

3.2 Extent to which assessment procedures are rigorous

Assessment procedures were well planned and conducted. There are appropriate checks in place to ensure that students are not unfairly disadvantaged. We would highlight for commendation the routine sampling of all questions for second marking and for third marker opinion when necessary. Projects are marked independently of the supervisor which is a good practice.

Response from college requested: **NO**

Professor A.F

I completely agree with the lead examiner's comments.

3.3 Consistency of the level of assessment with the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ)

The assessment levels were consistent with FHEQ levels 4-7.

Response from college requested: **NO**

Professor A.F

I completely agree with the lead examiner's comments.

3.4 Standard of marking

The standard of marking is high, with good levels of consistency and reproducibility between first and second markers in most cases. There is no doubt that markers' annotation of scripts against benchmarks implied in indicative answers is of high value and was generally conducted well. While annotation of scripts was better than last year, there is still variability in practice and there were a few instances where questions were annotated poorly, if at all, leading to discrepancies that required third marker involvement. Annotation and award of marks against an agreed indicative answer should be regarded as essential practice by all examiners. There were some excellent indicative answers and question marking schemes, although some essay outline answers or marking schemes were vague. While no major issues affecting outcome were found, it would be good practice, if essays are to remain a major vehicle of examination, that answers and marking schemes are constructed more fully against the common grading scheme (CGS). This is a robust and commendable scheme which should aid both students and examiners; it should be used at the question-setting stage as well as the marking stage.

Response from college requested: YES

Professor A.F

I completely agree with the lead examiner's comments.

COURSE DIRECTOR: Dr Charlotte Lawson

Course Director Response:

We thank the External Examiners for their comments and will pass these on to the internal examiners.

Action Required:

Examination officer to continue to remind examiners of the importance of annotation of scripts - The RVC now requires that all examiners annotate scripts and scripts that are not annotated are returned to the original markers for remarking.

Examination Officer will also request that when examiners set questions and provide indicative answers they also give an idea of how the answers relate to the CGS

Action Deadline:

01-Mar-2017

Action assigned to:

Examinations Officer

3.5 In your view, are the procedures for assessment and the determination of awards sound and fairly conducted? (e.g. Briefing, Exam administration, marking arrangements, Board of Examiners, participation by External Examiners)

The procedures for assessment and determination of awards were fair and sound.

Response from college requested: NO

Professor A.F

I completely agree with the lead examiner's comments.

3.6 Opinion on changes to the assessment procedures from previous years in which you have examined

We noted no changes of importance from previous years.

Response from college requested: NO

Professor A.F

I completely agree with the lead examiner's comments.

3.7 Please provide any additional comments and recommendations regarding the procedures

Response from college requested: NO

General Statements

4.1 Comments I have made in previous years have been addressed to my satisfaction

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

This is Professor Baxter's first year as external examiner. Professor Fazeli and Dr Scase feel that their previous comments have been addressed satisfactorily and that significant progress has been made in some areas.

Response from college requested: **NO**

Professor A.F

I completely agree with the lead examiner's comments.

COURSE DIRECTOR: Dr Charlotte Lawson

Course Director Response:

We would like to thank the External Examiners for their positive comments and for identifying areas where we have made progress with our assessment procedures

Action Required:

Action Deadline:

Action assigned to:

4.2 An acceptable response has been made

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

Response from college requested: **NO**

Professor A.F

I confirm that acceptable responses were made.

4.3 I approved the papers for the Examination

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

Response from college requested: **NO**

Professor A.F

I have approved the papers for the examination.

4.4 I was able to scrutinise an adequate sample of students' work and marks to enable me to carry out my duties

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

Response from college requested: **NO**

Professor A.F

I was able to scrutinise an adequate sample of students' work and marks to enable me to carry out my duties.

4.5 I attended the meeting of the Board of Examiners held to approve the results of the Examination

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

Response from college requested: **NO**

Professor A.F

I attended the meeting of the Board of Examiners held to approve the results of the Examination.

4.6 Candidates were considered impartially and fairly

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

We would be interested to know about the procedures and processes for accepting and dealing with student extenuating circumstances and how these decisions feed into examination board considerations. This is to assess how consistently students are treated within the institution and to form a judgement around comparative practice in other institutions. A particular question relates to application of extenuating circumstances for students holding marks at classification borderlines. Although we are not aware of any students being affected this year, no information was provided. A particular issue could arise if a final year student at the 69% threshold had extenuating circumstances affecting part or all of the final year assessment. Some information on the policy and how students are advised would be useful.

Response from college requested:

YES

Professor A.F

I agree with the lead examiner's comments.

COURSE DIRECTOR: Dr Charlotte Lawson

Course Director Response:

RVC has had a 'fit to sit' approach for its BSc students for a number of years. This means that a student can defer their sitting of an exam then the mark will count as it is. There is no capping of marks if a student defers to the next sit. If a student feels ill/disabled then deferring. That decision is always taken with the student's best chance of success in mind.

This whole area has been fully considered by the College committees in the past when it was decided to align the practices for all degrees. The deferral approach had worked very well for decades in the registerable degrees. We decided to bring the science degrees in line with the other degrees.

- As a small institution, we would never produce sufficient cases to develop a notion of fairness that can be applied to mitigating marks as a result.
- Medical notes cannot be reliably used as comparable objective evidence given the wide range of circumstances covered
- Applying fair judgments in mitigating circumstances cases is known to be difficult, subjective and a notable strand of complaint
- RVC had never had a student complaint stating our deferral approach was of itself unfair
- We believe this approach reflects the situation in employment and so matches the vocational ethos of the College

It also should be noted that the RVC Charter (<http://www.rvc.ac.uk/Media/Default/About/Academic%20Quality,%20Regulations%20and%20Procedures/General/THE%20RO>) asks members of the College to be alert to their own health and development needs and take appropriate action. So overall we believe that our approach is fair, prepares students for employment and does not disadvantage students.

Action Required:

Action Deadline:

Action assigned to:

4.7 The standards set for the awards are appropriate for qualifications at this level, in this subject

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

Response from college requested: NO

Professor A.F

The standards set are appropriate for qualifications at this level.

4.8 The standards of student performance are comparable with similar programmes or subjects in other UK institutions with which I am familiar

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

Response from college requested: NO

Professor A.F

In my opinion, the standards of student performance are comparable with similar programmes in other UK institutions.

4.9 I have received enough support to carry out my role

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

Response from college requested: NO

Professor A.F

Yes I have received enough support to carry out my role as an external examiner.

4.10 I have received sufficient information to carry out my role (where information was insufficient, please give details)

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

Response from college requested: NO

Professor A.F

Yes I did receive sufficient information to carry out my role.

4.11 Appropriate procedures and processes have been followed

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

Response from college requested: NO

Professor A.F

In my opinion appropriate procedures and processes have been followed.

4.12 The processes for assessment and the determination of awards are sound

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

Response from college requested: NO

Professor A.F

I agree that the processes for assessment and the determination of awards were sound.

Completion

If you have identified any areas of good practice, please comment more fully here. We may use information provided in our annual external examining report:

5.1 Do you have any suggestions for improvements based on experience at other institutes? We may use information provided in our annual external examining report:

The opportunity to meet students prior to the examination board would be valued. While not taking part directly in any form of assessment, the external examiners would like to have the opportunity to have an informal meeting with a group of students drawn from across the cohorts to ascertain their views about programme content and their understanding of assessment procedures. This would provide further information and a point of reference for us. This is increasingly common practice at other institutions and we wonder if the College might explore this possibility next year.

We have identified in this report a number of commendable practices. The quality of course content, curriculum design and assessment are very high. There is a good mixture of pedagogical and assessment methods. Practices around sample marking are excellent and this system appears to work well. Standard marking schemes including the CGS are very good with appropriate gradings. The commitment of academic staff to delivery and assessment of the programme, and to the support of students, is very apparent.

Response from college requested: NO

Professor A.F

I agree with the lead examiner's comments.

COURSE DIRECTOR: Dr Charlotte Lawson

Course Director Response:

we thank the external examiners for identifying a number of areas of good practice on our programme. We will ask the Examinations Officer to explore this further with the external examiners so that a suitable time for the External Examiner(s) to meet with current students can be arranged either prior to or on the day of the Examboard.

Action Required:

Arrange for current BSc/MSci students to meet with External Examiners

Action Deadline:

28-Jun-2017

Action assigned to:

Examinations Officer

5.2 External Examiner comments: For College information only (Responses to External Examiners are published on the College's website. Please only use this box to add any comments that you wish to remain confidential, if any)

Response from college requested: NO