ANNUAL QUALITY IMPROVEMENT REPORT 2020/21

Appendix 3: External Examiners' report

Veterinary Gateway

This appendix contains Year Leader's responses to 2020/21 External Examiners' comments and updates to actions from previous External Examiners' reports (if applicable).

As Year Leader/Course Director 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.

Appendix 3 consists of:

a.	Updates to actions from previous years' reports
b.	2020/21 Collaborative Annual Report with responses from Course Director/Year Leader

Report Question	External Examiners' comment	Course Directors response and actions	Update in 2020/21
3.1 Assessment methods (relevance to learning objectives and curriculum)	Due to COVID-19, Gateway assessments were formative only and all students progress to the following year. In all programmes, there is a good range of assessment methods; this variety provides students with several ways to demonstrate their knowledge and there is no reliance on a single method of assessment. This is in line with the sector. The heavy reliance on the essays seen in previous years appears to become less which we welcome. A continuing move towards full online assessments would eradicate a few remaining issues with poor handwriting (students as well as markers occasionally) in short answer questions and project write- ups..	Lisa Thurston: To finalise assessment planning relating to Covid-19 restrictions in 2020-21 and explore the possible use of proctoring software to enable us to provide a summative examination strategy. **Action Deadline:** 01-Oct-2020 **Action assigned to:** L Thurston	Complete – proctored online assessment took place in 2021-21 and will continue into 2021-22.
3.7 Please provide any additional comments and recommendations regarding the procedures	As an external examiner working from home this year I was able to devote more time to reading through the in course assessments and library projects than in the past. This was a beneficial experience and added considerably to my appreciation of the student abilities. It may be worth trying to retain this option for future external examiners.	We are pleased that the external examiners were able to review our in-course assessments and library projects in advance of the Progression Board this year and agree that it would be advantageous to continue this option in future years. **Action Required:** Lisa Thurston, Adam Osgood, Emma Rosenberg: To explore the possibility that external examiners could have access the Gateway in-course assessments and library projects in advance of the date of the Exam Board. **Action Deadline:** 03-May-2021 **Action assigned to:** L Thurston, A Osgood, E Rosenberg	Complete – External examiners now have access to online assessment material in advance of the exam board

Collaborative Report

Exam board meeting: 01-Jul-2021

Veterinary Gateway Programme, 2020/21

Lead examiner: Professor William Holt

Collaborating examiner(s): Dr Lucy Green

The Programme

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

1.1 Course content

As a general observation, course content is appropriate for the Gateway course. There is considerable variety and choice available to students and the range of topics provides highly contemporary coverage of the veterinary and biomedical sciences.

COURSE DIRECTOR: Dr Lisa Thurston

Course Director Response:

We thank the external examiners for their positive comments. Despite the many challenges posed by the Covid-19 restrictions we have strived to create a dynamic and exciting course utilising a blend of on-and off-campus teaching and learning for these widening participation students. We are very proud of how this year has been received by students and staff alike.

Action Required:

Action Deadline:

Action assigned to:

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

The learning objectives for each course were clearly stated or found on RVC LEARN and readily accessible to us and the students. Exam questions appear to cover the teaching blueprint and learning outcomes.

Learning objectives were stated in most draft examination papers for Gateway. This has improved from previous years.

COURSE DIRECTOR: Dr Lisa Thurston

Course Director Response:

We thank the external examiners for recognising that all learning objectives are clearly signposted on Learn to students for each learning activity. We have made a significant effort to ensure that despite modification of some areas of the course for off-campus delivery, all previous learning objectives have continued to be met throughout 2020-21. We also thank you for noting the positive effect of mapping learning objectives onto the examination papers (summative and formative).

Action Required:

Action Deadline:

Action assigned to:

1.3 Teaching methods

Teaching methods which include didactic lectures, small group teaching, practicals, guided self-directed learning and research projects appear appropriate.
The examiners note that COVID-19 has impacted substantially on teaching and assessment processes but we also note that the College adapted its methods and attempted to mitigate negative impact on students as far as possible. The examiners appreciated the efforts made by the teaching team to mitigate the negative impacts of COVID-19, even to the extent of contacting schools in order to ascertain whether students had been prevented from learning certain topics (e.g. some aspects of molecular biology), which they would normally have covered before commencing at the RVC. It was also apparent that the teaching team had implemented extra seminars and other novel measures in an effort to help the students.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic the assessments were all online.

COURSE DIRECTOR: Dr Lisa Thurston

Course Director Response:

We thank the external examiners for recognising the significant efforts of the course management team to mitigate the negative impacts of Covid on our Gateway students. In summary we have: (1) Carried out an ethics approved baseline survey to obtain a snapshot of attitudes at start of course, to inform transition support. This will be repeated at end of the Gateway year and at the start of the BVetMed course; (2) Contacted each student's Level 3 teachers to identify their support requirements - this information highlighted areas of the Level 3 curriculum that were not taught due to lockdown; (3) Run academic intervention and revision sessions for each Gateway module to supplement absent Level 3 knowledge, enabling students to more easily access our Higher Education content and study; (4) Run a reflective task around the Inheritance, Genes and Evolution and Biology of Cells formative examinations; (5) Delivered Transition Tutorials with each Gateway student to create individual support profiles – tutorials ran in November 2020 and were repeated in January 2021 and May 2021 to adapt support as students moved through the course; (6) Delivered a new Science Development and Communication support module consisting of on-campus small group workshops linked to each taught module designed to target areas of the curriculum that previous Gateway cohorts had found challenging (including data interpretation and analysis, DNA/RNA analysis and primer design, public engagement etc).

Action Required:

Action Deadline:

Action assigned to:

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

There were no resource issues identified during the review of the examinations.

COURSE DIRECTOR: Dr Lisa Thurston

Course Director Response:

We thank the External Examiners for their positive comments regarding the academic resources provided for off-campus proctored assessment.

Action Required:

Action Deadline:

Action assigned to:

1.5 Please provide any additional comments and recommendations regarding the Programme

No further comments.

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 in all programmes is comparable to what we have observed in Russell Group universities offering similar or related programmes of study (Birmingham, Nottingham, Southampton, Sheffield, Cardiff).

COURSE DIRECTOR: Dr Lisa Thurston

Course Director Response:

We are reassured that our students are performing at a level comparable with partner institutions.

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

It was clear from the coursework and library projects that many of the students tackled their essays enthusiastically, and some produced work of an exceptionally high standard. The library projects covered a wide range of current and highly relevant topics, including the use of stem cells in veterinary medicine, the impacts of ageing on immune function, and an exceptional essay on sensory function during the flight of birds. As part of the Gateway course, the students normally spend a period on a farm, helping with lambing. For obvious reasons this was not feasible this year and they had instead to write reviews of relevant topics, such as the causes of mortality in pre-weaned piglets. A few of these essays were outstanding and the students has clearly put a great deal of effort into both the writing and presentation. Unfortunately, those students at the bottom of the range submitted poor essays, where important aspects of the topic had been missed, or where students had showed evidence of poor or careless writing ability, or poor proofreading of their own work. It was clear that this specific exercise was a very helpful indicator of students' ability.

COURSE DIRECTOR: Dr Lisa Thurston

Course Director Response:

We are encouraged to see that the educational support and development opportunities put in place for the Gateway students in 2020-21 have had a positive impact on their in-course assessment and examination results. We agree that the standard of much of the course work and library projects has been exceptional. The quality of library projects demonstrates the resilience and unwavering commitment to their career goals that we have seen in our Gateway students despite the significant challenges of the past academic year.

We thank the external examiners for their comments on the ability of the Animal Husbandry module in-course assessment to differentiate between student performances across all grade boundaries. As the external examiners state, given the ongoing Covid-19 restrictions, it was prudent not to rely on students being able to generate data during 2020-21 AHEMS lambing placements for their Animal Husbandry in-course assessment. As such, for 2020-21 and onwards, Part 3 of the Gateway Assessment and Award Regulations were changed in regard to the weighting of the examination and in-course assessment. In 2019-20, the examination was weighted at 5 credits and the in-course assessment (lambing report) was weighted at 10 credits. To bring the Animal Husbandry assessments in line with the rest of the modules on the Gateway course (and to remove the need to secure a practical lambing AHEMS placement), we reversed the weightings, marking the examination 10 credits and the in-course assessment 5 credits. The in-course assessment was modified to reflect this change in assessment weighting, asking students to write a husbandry protocol, which the student selected from a range of topics. This was 1500-words and based on the type of literature sent out by vet practices to their clients. The

change in content and the reduction in word count brings this in-course assessment closely into line with similarly weighted in-course assessments on other Gateway modules. These changes do not affect AHEMS regulations, as the students are still required to complete a lambing placement.

Action Required:

Action Deadline:

Action assigned to:

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

As observed in previous years, the students' performance in the IGE module was poorer than in other modules. We have previously suggested that exam stress associated with answering simple arithmetical questions may have been responsible for this problem, and it is noteworthy that teaching staff have made considerable efforts to mitigate this effect. This year the students needed detailed understanding of the intricacies of DNA and RNA sequences, where it can be easy to lose marks through lack of care when answering the questions. Perhaps the students would benefit from more practice at answering this type of question.

COURSE DIRECTOR: Dr Lisa Thurston

Course Director Response:

Unfortunately, the Inheritance, Genes and Evolution module has again seen poorer student performance compared to other Gateway modules. We thank the external examiners for acknowledging the extensive support strategies that have been put in place this year to develop student academic performance (discussed earlier). We agree with the external examiners who state that the questions on the 2020-21 examination paper were demanding and required a good working knowledge of codons and molecular analysis. Given that in this and previous years, the external examiners have discussed the impact of exam stress on a students' ability to cope with intricate numerical/molecular interpretation tasks, we plan to convert this type of assessment to an in-course assessment where students will be able to demonstrate their abilities more effectively.

Action Required:

Re-design the Inheritance, Genes and Evolution assessments to ensure students complete a DNA/RNA sequence analysis task as part of their in-course assessment, rather that as an examination question.

Action Deadline:

01-Dec-2021

Action assigned to:

L Thurston, B Cobb

Assessment Procedures

Please comment, as appropriate, on:

3.1 Assessment methods (relevance to learning objectives and curriculum)

In all programmes, there is a good range of assessment methods; this variety provides students with several ways to demonstrate their knowledge and there is no reliance on a single method of assessment. This is in line with the sector.

One advantage of online assessments is the eradication of issues with poor handwriting (students as well as markers occasionally) in short answer questions and project write- ups.

COURSE DIRECTOR: Dr Lisa Thurston

Course Director Response:

We thank the external examiners for their positive comments. As noted by the External Examiners, an additional benefit of the online assessment format is that it has helped to address issues such as deciphering poor handwriting. Marking of papers has also become more time efficient and straightforward for academic staff, increasing the potential for team marking using rigorous model answers and marking breakdowns.

Action Required:

Action Deadline:

Action assigned to:

3.2 Extent to which assessment procedures are rigorous

COVID-19 will have substantially impacted on Gateway student learning, and it seems likely that it will continue to be felt in the subsequent years by some students. This will need to be monitored and mitigated where possible.

COURSE DIRECTOR: Dr Lisa Thurston

Course Director Response:

We agree that due to the impact of Covid on student learning, we will need to monitor and support student performance in latter years of the course. To begin to facilitate this the 2020-21 Gateway cohort will be invited to a series of Summer School sessions (July-September 2021), where they will reflect on their learning, focus on AHEMS placement opportunities, be introduced to the BVetMed1 curriculum and directed to pre-learning reading and online anatomy material and celebrate their successes with the first informal Gateway ‘Graduation’. In addition, the individual Transition Tutorials that took place during the Gateway year will continue into BVetMed 1 to provide continuity of support.

Action Required:

Deliver Gateway to BVetMed transition summer school 2021.
Deliver Gateway to BVetMed transition tutorials 2021-22.

Action Deadline:

20-Sep-2022

Action assigned to:

L Thurston, G MacKintosh-Sim

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

The level of assessment in all programmes is entirely consistent with the FHEQ.

COURSE DIRECTOR: Dr Lisa Thurston

Course Director Response:

We thank the external examiners for this positive comment.

Action Required:

Action Deadline:

Action assigned to:

3.4 Standard of marking

There was evidence of good practice in many places. Notably, the quality of feedback for Gateway and BSc 1 library projects was high. Overall the standard of has improved over the last few years. It is noted however that for some assessments there is still inconsistency between markers in style and quality of feedback. The examiners considered suggesting that a more highly structured method for providing feedback would be an advantage to students, and this topic was also discussed in the exam board meeting. This issue was left for the teaching staff to investigate.

COURSE DIRECTOR: Dr Lisa Thurston

Course Director Response:

We thank the External Examiners' for their positive comments on the quality of feedback provided by markers, and note their concerns regarding the consistency of feedback styles on some assessments. The use of online marking has already enabled us to provide greater consistency, requiring staff to provide feedback on each sub-section of a question and so, providing the students with a more detailed understanding of the reasoning behind their mark. In future years, online marking may enable us to further address some of the external examiners' concerns by implementing strategies that enforce greater consistency in feedback styles, such as an online rubric. In the future, whether assessments are run remotely or in person, we will continue to encourage staff to provide a good standard of feedback and will make suggestions on the format of this feedback which, should be individualised and reflect the common marking scheme.

Action Required:

Investigate the possibility of introducing an online marking rubric to enhance consistency of feedback in assessments.

Action Deadline:

01-Sep-2022

Action assigned to:

L Thurston, C Lawson, D Palmer

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 employed by the College were fair and all carried out with great efficiency by the Examinations Office. External examiners were given ample opportunity to ask questions or express their opinion despite the necessary move to online scrutiny of papers and online meetings due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. We are grateful to the exams office for their clear communication around the time of exam paper scrutiny, preparation for external examining, and clear links / access to the online systems.

COURSE DIRECTOR: Dr Lisa Thurston

Course Director Response:

We would like to thank the RVC Exams Office staff, in particular Emma Rosenberg and Adam Osgood, for their efficiency in running the Gateway assessments and assisting the External Examiners.

Action Required:

Action Deadline:

Action assigned to:

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

It is quite difficult to comment on this in light of the COVID circumstances. The assessment procedures have had to be adjusted to the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak in 2020/21.

As noted, it will be important for the College to keep an eye on the pathway of individual students to mitigate impacts of the pandemic on their learning and ability to perform effectively in assessments in subsequent years.

COURSE DIRECTOR: Dr Lisa Thurston

Course Director Response:

We agree that due to the impact of Covid on student learning, we will need to monitor and support student performance on an ongoing basis (see previous discussions).

Action Required:

Action Deadline:

Action assigned to:

3.7 Please provide any additional comments and recommendations regarding the procedures

No further comments

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:

4.2 An acceptable response has been made

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

4.3 I approved the papers for the Examination

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

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:

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:

4.6 Candidates were considered impartially and fairly

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

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:

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:

4.9 I have received enough training and support to carry out my role

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

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:

4.11 Appropriate procedures and processes have been followed

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

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

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

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 clarity and detail of feedback for students for their library projects and other assessments is commendable.

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)

Notes of the 2019/2020 Annual Quality Improvement Group meeting for:

Gateway, BVetMed Year 1, BVetMed Year 2, Accelerated BVetMed

held on 16th December 2020

Gateway

External Examiners report

It was noted that the report is very positive, particularly given the difficulties in the previous year where there were some very low exams results. They have commended the supporting mechanism for students prior to the exams. To pre-empt any difficulties of External Examiners accessing the material on RVC Learn, the course team has emailed them all the necessary documents.

Annotation of scripts – The group discussed the comment in the Course Director's response under question 3.4 '*…. we were forced this year to ask markers to provide online feedback only, something that prevented annotation of scripts'*. It was clarified that the phrase '*annotation of scripts'* could mean either providing comments as feedback to students (by writing on the script or within the OCM comment box) or the process of justifying the mark.

The response to the External Examiner's report were approved subject to actions from previous year to be updated.

ACTION: Gateway Leader to edit the report with update to actions from previous years

AQIR

It was noted that some of the report encompasses the comments on the teaching in Term 1 of 20/21. To ensure uniform review of 2019/20 academic year and to keep it in line with other courses, this section will be extracted to be included in the next year' report.

In 2019-20, the January summative examinations went ahead as planned. However, due to the COVID-19 restrictions, the April examinations were moved to remote online open-book assessments. Students were still provided with extensive feedback for each module assessment including a module mark. This year there were no student library project presentations. Instead, the project write-up formed 100% of the marks. This was reflected in a change to the Gateway 2019-20 Award and Assessment Regulations. It was particularly encouraging to see a marked improvement in student performance in the Inheritance, Genes and Evolution module which, despite producing lower marks than the other modules (median was 45%, while all other modules produced medians above 50%), was much higher than last year's equivalent score (26.63%).

Suggested edits:

- Section 4.2 of the Action plan – there are two actions points 1.19 with the same update to action. In addition, the expected completion date needs to be updated either as completed or a new suitable date in the future.
- Section 4.3 of the Action plan – *Analyse how Gateway contextual data at entry impacts on performance on the Gateway year and years 1, 2 & 3 of the BVetMed –all three actions are of a particular interest internally as well as to some external partners such as Sutton Trust to use Gateway*

course as a case study. However due to the time constrains since the pandemic, it was confirmed that all three actions are still ongoing. Date needs to be update with a suitable new date in the future.

ACTION: Gateway Leader to edit the action plan