ANNUAL QUALITY IMPROVEMENT REPORT 2016/17

Appendix 3: External Examiners' report

Undergraduate Biosciences

This appendix contains Course Director's/Year Leader's responses to 2016/17 External Examiners' comments and updates to actions from 2015/16 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

Appendix 3 consists of:

a.	Updates from Course Director/Year Leader to actions from previous years' reports (if applicable)
b.	2016/17 Collaborative Annual Report with responses from Course Director/Year Leader

a. Update to actions from 2015/16 External Examiners Report:

Question	External Examiners' comments	Course Director's response & Action	Update in 2016/17
1.4 Resources	…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.	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 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	completed
2.3 …recommendations regarding the students' performance	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.	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	Completed – marks showed a good spread with expected numbers of firsts this year
3.1 Assessment methods	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	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	Discussed at CMC. Spread in questions was discussed in the BSc1 papers for June 2017 ensuring that there was a balance across the modules of PSQ and essay

	and whether these outcomes, which may include conceptual understanding and knowledge integration, necessitate an essay component in every module/examination.		
3.4 Standard of marking	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.	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	completed
5.1 …suggestions for improvements	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.	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	Not completed due to time constraints of external examiners

Collaborative Report

Exam board meeting: 29-Jun-2017

BSc in Bioveterinary Sciences, 2016/17

Lead examiner: Dr Timothy Scase

Collaborating examiner(s): Professor Gary Baxter, Professor William Holt

The Programme

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

1.1 Course content

I was involved in the review of BSc Biosciences years 1-3 and the Intercalated BSc in Pathological sciences. The course content of each year of the courses reviewed was both broad and covered the material in good depth. A wide range of subject matter is covered in the courses with a range of different modules available, particularly in year 3 of the BSc Biosciences course. The subject matter in each course reviewed was of appropriate level of difficulty throughout.

Response from college requested: **NO**

Professor G.B

I agree with the above. In addition, I also reviewed the work of a single MSci candidate and found the content of the final year project to be entirely appropriate for an M level award.

COURSE DIRECTOR: Dr Charlotte Lawson

Course Director Response:

We would like to thank the external examiners for their input with our examination process and their very positive comments and reflections on our current processes and procedures.

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 and readily accessible to the students. The examination process related to these learning objectives and appear to have been met. Indeed, some of the model answers provided for the questions in the examinations also detailed the learning objectives for that segment of the course. It was then straightforward for us as external examiners to review the question and the learning objectives and to determine how the student's answers reflected both the teaching and their understanding of the subject matter. We commend the staff that adopted this approach and the resulting transparency of the teaching and assessment process.

Response from college requested: **NO**

Professor G.B

I agree with the above. Item analysis of MCQs is extremely helpful in identifying the extent to which learning objectives and assessment are aligned.

COURSE DIRECTOR: Dr Charlotte Lawson

Course Director Response:

We would like to thank the External Examiners for their positive comments regarding the addition of LOs to the questions and model answers. This is a new initiative for our BSc Biosciences papers and we are glad that you found it useful. We will continue to request that examiners add the LOs to their questions.

Action Required:

Action Deadline:

Action assigned to:

1.3 Teaching methods

A range of teaching methods have been employed throughout these courses. These included didactic lectures, small group teaching, practicals, guided self-directed learning and research projects. The wide range of teaching methodologies that have been used greatly adds to the value of the courses. It is clear from the discussions at the Board of Examiners how committed the teaching staff are to their students' academic progress.

Response from college requested: **NO**

Professor G.B

I agree with the above.

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

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

Response from college requested: **NO**

Professor G.B

I agree with the above.

1.5 Please provide any additional comments and recommendations regarding the Programme

No further comments.

Response from college requested: NO

Professor G.B

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 course material is comparable to other similar courses at other institutions and is of comparable difficulty and depth. Similarly, the students' performance is comparable to those seen at other institutions. The total number of First class and Upper Second class degrees awarded is comparable to previous years of these courses and is very comparable to other institutions.

Response from college requested: **NO**

Professor G.B

I agree with the above. At all levels, students' performance reflects a range of ability and intellectual development broadly comparable to that seen in Russell Group institutions.

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

As is to be expected, there was a wide range in the quality of the answers provided for most questions. In general, for most papers it was clear that the different ability levels of the students was broadly reflected across the full range of questions and papers. The most able students frequently provided excellent answers and in particular some of the essays written by these students were of very high quality.
In contrast, the students at the bottom of the range generally performed poorly across all the different papers. In particular, the essays written by such students were either extremely brief and/or contained little or no relevant information that pertained to the question. Students are required to write essays throughout the courses for in-course assessments, indicating that they would have the opportunity to discuss essay writing techniques with the course tutors.
The students in the middle of the range, again generally performed at a mid-level throughout all of their assessments. Occasionally, very poorly answered questions would reduce their overall mark, but the number of questions and papers used in the examinations ensured that loss of marks over a single question would not greatly affect the overall outcome of the assessment.

Response from college requested: **NO**

Professor G.B

I agree with the above. I was able to select examples of examination scripts from across the performance range and am happy with the quality of performance and assessment.

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

As in previous years, we discussed the general trajectory of the students from years 1-3, and onwards to year 4 of the taught MSc. There does appear to be a general trend towards marks at the end of year examinations increasing as the students progress through their courses. However, we would welcome a more rigorous analysis of the examination data.

Response from college requested: YES

Professor G.B

The issue of exit velocity is of interest and I would echo the suggestion of further analysis, particularly in relation to students progressing to the MSci year. For the single candidate this year, there was evidence of steady improvement beyond year 2 (54% aggregate mark) to year 4 (69%).

COURSE DIRECTOR: Dr Charlotte Lawson

Course Director Response:

CD and year leaders will continue to monitor ICAs throughout the year and tutors will continue to be sent marks for these assessments to ensure that individual students are recommended for additional learning support if they are not performing as expected. 2018-19 we plan to introduce mid-term examinations in January which will further provide an opportunity to monitor progress.

Action Required:

CD, year leaders and tutors will continue to be sent marks throughout the year in order to monitor progress of the cohort as a whole and for individual students

Action Deadline:

Action assigned to:

Assessment Procedures

Please comment, as appropriate, on:

3.1 Assessment methods (relevance to learning objectives and curriculum)

The assessment methods throughout the courses are and different years are appropriate and have been performed with rigour. A wide range of methods were employed, including short answers questions, problem-solving questions, multiple choice questions, project presentations, etc. In most modules and papers, there were essay-style questions. Whilst some of the questions had some structure and hence provided some guidance for the structuring of the answer, there were many instances when the essay questions were very open-ended and brief. Whilst the very best students frequently provided very good answers to this style of question, those students with less ability often seemed to perform poorly. I would encourage discussions between the teaching staff to decide whether such questions are appropriate for all subject matter.

Response from college requested: YES

Professor G.B

I agree with the above. As I commented last year, I do wonder if there is an over-reliance on the essay format which is employed in almost every modular examination and arguably is labour-intensive and more difficult to mark with consistency across subject domains.

COURSE DIRECTOR: Dr Charlotte Lawson

Course Director Response:

CD takes note of this and will bring it up for discussion at the next Course Management Committee, to ensure that all module papers are balanced. We will also seek advice from the Director of Assessments

Action Required:

CMC secretary to include item on Autumn 2017 CMC Agenda for verbal report from CD on use of structured vs open ended and brief essay style questions in exams

Action Deadline:

06-Nov-2017

Action assigned to:

CMC Secretary, course director

3.2 Extent to which assessment procedures are rigorous

The assessment procedures are rigorous and were carried out diligently. All written papers were marked once by a single examiner, and then 10-20% of all answers were double marked. Where there was disagreement between the first and second marker, the disagreements were discussed and a consensus mark awarded. The great majority of the written papers were carefully annotated by the first marker. This practice is to be highly commended and it enabled the external examiners to easily identify where and why marks were assigned for an individual answer. It also provides an opportunity for feedback on individual questions to be given to the student.

Response from college requested: NO

Professor G.B

I agree with the above.

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

The level of assessment was of expected standard throughout the examination procedure.

Response from college requested: NO

Professor G.B

I agree with the above.

3.4 Standard of marking

The standard of marking was consistently high throughout the papers.

Response from college requested: NO

Professor G.B

I agree with the above. As noted previously, the systems in place for sampling and duplicate-marking (in some cases triplicate marking) are exemplary.

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 sound and all carried out with great efficiency by the Examinations Office.

Response from college requested: NO

Professor G.B

I agree with the above.

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

The assessment procedures used were similar to previous years that we have examined.

Response from college requested: NO

Professor G.B

I agree.

3.7 Please provide any additional comments and recommendations regarding the procedures

No further comments.

Response from college requested: NO

Professor G.B

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:

We feel that our previous comments have been taken into consideration by the College. Our slight concerns from previous years over the apparent over-reliance on essay-style questions remains.

Response from college requested: NO

Professor G.B

I agree with the above.

4.2 An acceptable response has been made

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

Response from college requested: NO

Professor G.B

I agree.

4.3 I approved the papers for the Examination

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

Response from college requested: NO

Professor G.B

Yes

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 G.B

Yes

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 G.B

Yes

4.6 Candidates were considered impartially and fairly

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

Response from college requested: NO

Professor G.B

Yes

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 G.B

Yes

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 G.B

Yes

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 G.B

Yes

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 G.B

Yes

4.11 Appropriate procedures and processes have been followed

Yes

Additional comments, particularly if your answer was no:

Response from college requested: NO

Professor G.B

Yes

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 G.B

Yes

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:

We would encourage students to meet with their tutor after the examinations to discuss their performance. The excellent annotations of the scripts by the markers may help some students to identify areas of weak performance which they could work to address.
Our thorough review of the examinations confirms the high quality of both the course content and the assessment methods employed. It is clear from our discussions with the academic and support staff, how committed they are to the delivery of such excellent courses and the examinations that assess them. We have also been very impressed with the staff commitment to student welfare and support.

Response from college requested: **NO**

Professor G.B

I agree with the above.

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**

Professor G.B

No further comments.