

ANNUAL QUALITY IMPROVEMENT REPORT 2018/19

Appendix 3: External Examiners' report

MSc Wild Animal Biology/Health

This appendix contains Year Leader's responses to 2018/19 External Examiners' comments and updates to actions from previous External Examiners' reports (if applicable).

As 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.	2018/19 Collaborative Annual Report with responses from Course Director

a. Updates to actions from previous years' reports

Report Question	External Examiners' comments & suggested actions	Course Director/Year Leader's response & Action	Update in 2018/19
1.2 Learning objectives, and the extent to which they were met	It would be useful to see the learning objectives/ outcomes on the exam papers ie a reference point that the LOs are being met by that particular assessment	Where possible this will be performed for the 2018-19 exams. We shall report on the progress at the next examiners board meeting. Action: Course Directors Expected date of completion: September 2019	Completed: When questions were sent to the external examiners in 2018/19 ;earning outcomes were listed alongside the relevant question and model answer for all modular exams.
3.1 Assessment methods (relevance to learning objectives and curriculum)	There were questions on the relevance and quality of some of the MCQs. In some of them there was a majority of students selecting the same confounder and none the right question, which suggests there is an issue with the question. There was a suggestion in the board room that some question might have been from lectures that had actually changed or not been given. It is being proposed to substitute MCQs for more relevant short answer questions, in which case this may not be an issue for 2018/19 MSc.	Where possible this will be performed for the 2018-19 exams. The SAQs will have the same time allowance and the same weighting as the previous MCQs. We shall report on the progress at the next examiners board meeting. Action: Course Directors Expected date of completion: September 2019	Completed: SAQs replaced MCQs in all modular exams in 2018/19, and these were evaluated at both the 2019 interim, and final exams boards.
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 examinations, marking and awards are sound and fair. Meetings of the Board of Examiners are conducted very fairly, and comments of internal and external examiners are fully considered in making decisions. Online feedback was useful for the external examiner but this again was inconsistent	An interim exam board is planned to be held for the first time in May-June 2019. Online feedback would be discussed with external examiners at interim exam board. Action: Course Directors & Exams office Expected date of completion: May-June 2019	Completed: An interim exam board was held for the first time on 11 th June 2019.
3.6 Opinion on changes to the assessment procedures from previous years in which you have examined	This year, with all the oral examinations being compacted in a few hours in the morning, the external examination process felt more under pressure and a bit rushed at times. This meant we were not able to attend sample of oral examinations as done in previous years. The lowering of the threshold for distinctions has resolved the issue of low numbers of distinctions in previous courses; however this seems to result in a very	This will be brought to the attention of the Populations Course Management Committee Action: Course Directors Expected date of completion: May-June 2019	The use of an interim exams board helped to relieve the pressure on the external examiners' time this year and so there was time to attend some of the research oral examinations.

	narrow mark band for merits which may still affect the expected distribution of awards.		
3.7 Please provide any additional comments and recommendations regarding the procedures	It might be useful to have a 5 minute formal debrief of the board just at the beginning of the exam day to remind examiners of how the process is going to be and any details / changes from previous year that might be of relevance.	A pre-exam board on morning of research orals' day will be planned. Action: Exams Office Expected date of completion: September 2019	Completed: The pre-exam board meeting took place on 11 th September 2019 this year.

MSc in Wild Animal Biology, 2018/19

Lead examiner: Dr Javier Lopez

Collaborating examiner(s): Dr Linda Penfold

The Programme

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

1.1 Course content

As in previous years, the course content is adequate for this type and level of course, it is up to date and covers broadly all aspects of the two fields in depth and breadth. Students interviewed on the day of the oral presentations were of the same opinion

Dr L.P

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

Learning objectives are provided along with the model answers for the exams. To the extent that I could see, the exam questions covered/met the learning objectives

Dr L.P

1.3 Teaching methods

The broad range of teaching methods utilised including lectures, practical work, field visits, etc is good for this type of course. Again, the use and range of specialist guest speakers from different institutions was highlighted by the students as one of the most valued learning and networking opportunities from this course.

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

I did not notice or was informed of any resource issues that affected the student's assessment. Students commented on that the RVC's online library did not include access to a good number of relevant journals

Course Directors' response: Whilst there are a wide number of appropriate wildlife health-related journals available through the RVC, there are some journals that the students might wish to access that are outside of the scope of the college. However, between the RVC and ZSL, where the students also have access, they

ought to be able to access everything that they ought to have. Part of the problem though may be not knowing where to look. This will be passed onto the leaders of the research module (Monika Bohm and David Brodbelt) to highlight the joint provision during the research preparation week. Also during a student rep-staff meeting with the 2018-19 cohort, this was brought to the attention of the course directors who requested which extra journals the students wanted access to. Unfortunately there was no feedback to this request. It would be worth surveying the current class.

ACTION POINT: Course Directors to consult with current student reps to check if they are missing access to any particular titles.

1.5 Please provide any additional comments and recommendations regarding the Programme

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

Overall, students' work was of a high standard as reflected by the numbers of merits and distinctions awarded, following a pattern expected in this level of course where students are highly motivated. Some of the written work on research projects was of a standard suitable for scientific publication and overall of the expected quality in a course of this level. The students were highly motivated and innovative, and achieved a great deal in the short time allocated to these projects. As expected, students that did not achieve the level expected in course work and research were rare.

Course Directors' response: The course directors thank the external examiners for this comment about the high academic standard of the research projects. Following on from this, the course directors will suggest to the Associate Dean for Postgraduate Learning & Teaching that examiners state in their feedback if they believe the research is appropriate for publication

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

This year's cohort of students was of a good standard, reflected by their overall passing rate. During the sampling of exam papers, research talks, project reports and oral exams, there were clearly outstanding students, highly knowledgeable and able to extrapolate this knowledge to answer complicated questions. There were also a small number who did not meet the expected level of knowledge in some areas. These closely reflect the final marks awarded.

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

As in previous years, the opportunity to attend part of the Student Conference on the day before the oral exams was valuable to the examiner. The presentations were very well prepared and delivered with confidence. Due to time constraints, the External Examiner only attended a small proportion of these talks but had the opportunity to attend a good sample of the oral exams.

WAB, non-vet students commented that veterinary lectures were often difficult to follow for them and suggested if lectures could be adapted to help them. However, there was consensus that it is difficult to adapt the course contents without losing important information and that this is a high level course and it is expected to be hard.

Course Directors' response: Neither MSc programme is intended to be a veterinary course and no learning outcomes ought to be so veterinary-specific so as to be unobtainable by the WAB students. Learning outcomes for both module and individual lectures are currently being reviewed by the new module leaders and we would hope that this would highlight any instances where there are overly technical objectives.

Please comment, as appropriate, on:

3.1 Assessment methods (relevance to learning objectives and curriculum)

Appropriate and relevant to the curriculum; sufficiently varied to assess different skills such as ability to express ideas and make critical analyses through written and oral responses. This year the MCQs questions had been substituted for a smaller number of short answer questions which seems to have resolved the problems observed last year.

There was the occasional exam question that was not clearly worded. Model answers can vary greatly, in the rare occasion becoming unnecessarily complex which, in my opinion, makes the marker decision making more difficult. It is possible that a more standardised approach to writing the model answers and/or more careful vetting of the question will be helpful here. Having a number of questions to choose from to make a final decision for the exam, would be ideal.

Course Directors' response: It is good to hear that the switch from Multiple Choice Questions to Short Answer Question has been viewed as beneficial. We will endeavour to review the guidance given to authors when writing questions and model answers. This will help to standardise the format of both the questions and desired answers. Over time, it is hoped that a 'bank' of questions is built up in order to allow the selection of questions.

3.2 Extent to which assessment procedures are rigorous

The assessment procedures are rigorous.

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

The level of assessment is consistent with the FHEQ

3.4 Standard of marking

3.4 Standard of marking

Assessment of exams and course work is consistent, with both external examiners in general agreement with markers and sample markers.

The standard of marking is good. The use of a sample marker is welcomed and helps with consistency in grade allocation. The same applies to the system of two markers and a "referee" for project marking. I think this has helped greatly in reducing the instances where there were marked discrepancies between markers.

In the exam papers and projects sampled there was normally a good use of comments to explain why a mark was given. These are very useful for consistency amongst markers and very helpful for the external examiners assess process. The use of comments should continue to be encouraged.

As in previous years, it was felt that markers were not making full use of the range of marks (highest and lowest) available. This might be a reflection of a very homogeneous level of students but results in most of the final marks in a very narrow mark. The changes made last year to award distinction from 70% mark have allowed a good distribution of pass/merit/distinction marks but has resulted in a very narrow band (65-69%) for Merits which is unusual.

When checking SAQ exams, it was not always clear why a marker would decide to award a full mark (1) or no

mark at all (0) when the student's answer was not completely consistent with the model answer. This problem would be corrected by using half marks in these instances.

Course Directors' response: The award classification boundary is set College wide, not course specific, and the move to 70% for a Distinction and the narrowing of the Merit range was discussed fully prior to implementation. The college's Learning and Teaching Committee highlighted that the changes to thresholds for Merit and Distinction were based on modelling previous years' results and were not arbitrary. These changes are across all the PPS MScs and the decision had been made after the longitudinal analysis. The marking and annotation of the SAQs should clearly show how and where marks were awarded, to both sample markers and External Examiners. Staff will be reminded that this is a College requirement and staff members who do not conform will be highlighted to their Head of Department.

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 assessment procedures are rigorous, fair and transparent. Meetings of the Board of Examiners are conducted very fairly, and comments of internal and external examiners are fully considered in making decisions. All students were assessed individually on their own merits, and every case was highly considered and discussed so the students should have no concerns that anything than the upmost attention was given to their grade. All information required was available to external examiners to make a good assessment.

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

As mentioned above the changes to markers for exams (sample marking) and for research projects have worked well to produce reduce discrepancy between markers and make the process of marking and assessment easier and fairer.

The lowering of the threshold for distinctions has resolved the issue of low numbers of distinctions in previous courses; however the grades are still in a somewhat narrow range, so while there are a couple of low grades there are large amounts of 62-68, and a few 75 and not much higher. We briefly discussed how we might get a wider spread of grades, especially higher grades.

Having an interim meeting before the summer, where the work from the first 4 modules of the course is assessed, has been very helpful by reducing the workload on the two days ahead of the board meeting and more time for careful and fair assessment of the process.

Having a formal debrief of the board just at the beginning of the exam day was useful to the external examiner to remind how the process is going to be and any details / changes from previous year that might be of relevance.

Course Directors' response : We do encourage the examiners to use the full range of scores available from 0 to 100. The interim exam board has certainly taken some of the pressure off September. Thank you for the comments regarding this- we will continue that practice in future years.

3.7 Please provide any additional comments and recommendations regarding the procedures

The opportunity to meet the majority of the students immediately after the student presentations was very valuable. The relevant comments and suggestions made by the students were discussed by the external examiners at the meeting of the Board of Examiners.

Course Directors' response: The directors believe that this is good practice and shall continue to provide the opportunity for the external examiners to meet with the students and discuss the course.

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:

I was not able to approve the papers for the June exams but I understand that the second external examiner was able to.

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 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 opportunity provided for the externals to meet with the students immediately after the Student Conference in order to discuss issues relating to academic as well as administrative aspects of the course and examinations is very valuable.

Students highlighted the support that that some get from their supervisors and the appreciation for the excellent work that the course organisers have done

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)

