

EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT FORM FOR TAUGHT COURSES 2020-21

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Name(s) of course(s) examined <i>e.g. Tripos Part/ MPhil</i>	Genetics Tripos Part II			
Level (<i>Delete as appropriate</i>)	Undergraduate		Postgraduate	
Year of Appointment		2 nd		

	Yes	No	N/A
1. Are the academic standards set for the award appropriate for the qualification, and comparable with similar programmes in other UK institutions?	x		
2. Are you satisfied that you received sufficient programme materials (handbooks, regulations, marking and classing criteria) in a timely manner?	x		
3. Are you satisfied that you were consulted adequately on draft examination papers, and that your comments and suggestions were taken into consideration?	x		
4. Are you satisfied that the assessment was pitched at the appropriate level?	x		
5. Was the general standard and consistency of marking appropriate?	x		
6. Do the assessment processes measure student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the programme?	x		
7. Are you satisfied that issues raised on your previous report form have been properly considered and, where applicable, acted upon?	x		
8. Did you receive a written response from the Department to your previous report form?	x		

If you replied No to any of the questions above, please expand here:

Do you have any concerns about the course, including standards and quality?

As was the case last year, I can confirm again that I have no concerns about the course in terms of standards or quality. There has been a fairly recent change in the way that the course is structured into modules. The resulting course remains one that covers a wide range of topics and to a high standard. The materials provided on Moodle were very clear and easy to access. I think this would have been particularly welcomed by the students given the remote nature of studying over this past year.

Are you satisfied that the procedures associated with the assessment are efficient (e.g. timeframes, draft papers, questions, design and conduct of exam, meetings, vivas)?

The procedures for assessment were very good throughout, with care taken to make sure that any outlying questions/papers could have been identified and investigated further. Overall the students I think demonstrated consistency across papers, which is reassuring.

I think this particular cohort of students potentially had greater challenges to overcome than the cohort last year, because their second-year assessments had also been affected by the pandemic and they potentially had less of a grounding in their various subjects upon which they could rely. Given these exceptional circumstances, I think the Part II Genetics course and final examination procedure achieved its aim of allowing students to demonstrate the extent of their knowledge and understanding in as fair a way as possible. Keeping as far as possible to a familiar format (question number, style) was a very good approach and it was clear from conversations during the *vivas* that students were very clear about what they should expect.

The *vivas* took place online and this worked well. Students consistently appeared relaxed, perhaps more so than they might otherwise have been in person and I wonder if this is something to bear in mind for the future. All students were articulate and forthcoming in their answers and whilst the formality of the event was maintained they did not appear anxious. I was pleased to have the chance to congratulate them on having reached the end of their degree under such challenging circumstances.

In terms of the papers themselves, it was clear that they were all well-constructed and, in my view, tested the entire breadth of topics taught. There was ample time for me to comment on the precise nature of the questions (thank you) and only minor changes were made prior to finalisation of the exams themselves. The overall format works well.

My only criticism of the process relates to the duration of the exams themselves. I think this reflects a wider problem (my own institution has had the same experience) so I mention this as something to take into account, but I suspect it is difficult to achieve a perfect solution. The problem is the open book nature of exams coupled with a “long” time within which to do it. They will treat the exam as a piece of coursework and spend every second of the hours given trying to improve their answer. Marking is often relative and they know that being better than their peers may make a difference. The problem then is utterly burnt-out students, some of whom might have other exam periods immediately adjacent, or potentially even with overlapping periods, if taking particular combinations of subjects. My suggestion is that shorter periods of time is a better approach, with interspersed scheduled rest periods without timetabled exams.

Do you have any comments on marking and classing (e.g. range of marks, action around borderline marks, penalties, moderation, double marking, reconciliation of marks)?

As last year, I commend all assessors for their detailed comments on individual answers for each of the papers and for making all their considerations very easy for me to evaluate. Careful consideration was

made of the distribution of marks within and among the different papers and I have no concerns here. The senior examining team has a wealth of experience here and I think this shows.

We did have a particularly detailed discussion about marks for students within the borderline area, in order to make sure that the proportions of different classes of degree awarded were in line with what we would expect. I am very happy with the care taken to evaluate all the information available and to justify the final decisions made. I was able to contribute information based upon the *vivas*, which again I did 'blind', and made an assessment based upon the students' answers as to their likely grade. This was helpful in confirming that a small number of students who lay extremely close to the 1st border line, should in fact be awarded a 1st class degree.

Do you have any comments on the student experience of the course and/or their experience of the assessment process?

The students appeared to have coped extremely well with the circumstances, and I was impressed by their overall attitude. I gave them the opportunity to describe changes/additions/ amendments that they might recommend to the course, but there were very few suggestions here. I think they are confident that they have been taught well and that they come away from it with the skills they need for their 'next step'. Many indicated a desire for future study and I think they are well equipped for this.

The assessment process left them tired (very tired I think) and I've explained above the reasons I think for this. They had no criticisms however, and I suspect that the combination of college support with that of Genetics staff has created the best possible environment for them to study under the present circumstances.

Do you have any comments on University policies (e.g. the role of the external examiner, policies around plagiarism, script annotation)?

The university policies all appear very sensible and pragmatic under the circumstances. Depending on the plan for the coming year, my thoughts are really only that the 'open book' nature of exams needs to be really carefully thought through. It's been necessary to do things this way, but it is less than perfect, and requires perhaps some additional thinking in order to maintain a system where students are able to demonstrate the depth of their knowledge, and where the questions remain ones that allow us to distinguish between varying grades of ability.

Please describe here any recommendations for improvement.

I have no suggestions for improvement as such – although I would welcome the opportunity, as I was allowed for the present year, to learn how the assessment process is planned for next year.

Please highlight any good practice you encountered.

There remains good, clear communication to students about the assessment procedure. They clearly felt well looked after and said so during the *vivas*. The continued provision of high quality research projects, some of which involved laboratory data that were in some cases provided by other researchers still able to be physically present in the labs, was particularly impressive. The attitude of the students themselves to doing research in this new way was also excellent.

Have you seen any evidence of grade inflation?

No. We paid particular attention to this during discussion of border line grades.

If this is your final year as external examiner? If so, have you seen improvements over your tenure?
Has the Department acted on your advice?

This is my second year as examiner. I received a detailed response last year following my report and was very happy to see that my comments/thoughts have been considered so carefully.

Do you have any other comments?

I would like to thank the internal examiners for their helpful communications throughout the year, and for the very instructive meetings that we held to discuss the assessments.

Thank you for completing the Examiners Report form.

Please now forward to vcexternalexaminers@admin.cam.ac.uk by July 31st for undergraduate examinations, **1st October** for Masters Degrees, and **12th October** for resits.

Please also forward copies to your Chair of Examiners.