

EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT FORM FOR TAUGHT COURSES

Name	Aoife McLysaght		
Home Institution	University of Dublin, Trinity College		
Email Address			
Name(s) of course(s) examined <i>e.g. Tripos Part/ MPhil/ MRes</i>	Genetics Part II		
Academic year of examination	2023-24		
Level (<i>Delete as appropriate</i>)	Undergraduate		
Year of Appointment	1 st		

	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. Are you satisfied that issues raised on your previous report form have been properly considered and, where applicable, acted upon?			X
7. 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:

N/A

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

None. The quality of the course content, the standard of education and assessment, and the overall well-roundedness of the education is of the highest international standard. The Genetics Part II course in Cambridge provides a broad and thorough grounding in genetics, as appropriate for the final year of an undergraduate degree.

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)?

I was provided with exam papers and offered the opportunity to comment and suggest edits. I was very happy with the questions on the exam papers because I believe that they demanded of the students an appropriate blend of factual knowledge and genetics-based reasoning and understanding. The exam questions provided the opportunity for the truly excellent students to display their mastery of the topics.

The examiners' meetings and the vivas were all organised efficiently and fairly, and I was very happy with how everything was conducted, and I was facilitated at every step.

The examinations were run through Inspira, which I understand is a faculty-wide regulation. This generated several concerns for me regarding the administration of the examinations themselves. The administration of the Inspira system caused unpredictable delays in the grading of exam papers due to the need to wait for the scanned materials, while simultaneously not actually knowing which students had submitted scanned materials. This led to the potential situation where an exam paper was graded, and then only later the scanned materials arrive, so the exam must be re-graded. This causes an avoidable opportunity for error and unnecessary duplication of examiner work. Furthermore, the Inspira system carries a risk of technical failure, which I was not entirely convinced can be resolved fairly for the students.

At least one student of the Genetics Part II class lost their work midway through an exam and had to restart, ultimately only managing to formally submit a very short answer. Thankfully, after some persistence, we were able to retrieve the lost work from screen recordings, and the work was graded, though presumably the student still suffered loss of time (having to attempt to repeat their work), and presumed worry and loss of concentration, both of which will have impacted on the quality and amount of work submitted. In this case, we were advised that the appropriate thing to do was to grade simply what was available, without any consideration for the significant time lost due to technical problems, or the presumed effect on the student's concentration. Upon enquiry we were informed that the only recourse is for the student to initiate a complaint, for which the only possible outcomes were to stay as-is, or to have the whole exam disregarded.

One frustration during this process was that we were quite in the dark regarding what information was and was not available to the Inspira team to resolve the matter. Initial enquiries to the Inspira team resulted in short responses, with assertions of what had happened, but without providing us, the examiners, with any basis to understand the evidence for the statements. For example, we were told that in one exam the student simply ran out of time, but that in another (where they had reported their problems during the actual exam) there had been a problem. We were thus left wondering on what evidence the Inspira team were asserting that the student had merely run out of time in the first exam. It was only after persistent questioning that we were eventually provided with an explanation for the conclusions reached, and also some means to retrieve some of the lost material via the screen recording. I felt that this communication should have been more streamlined, and that we should not have had to struggle so much to obtain the necessary information.

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)?

The marking schemes are well-described and fair. I was particularly pleased with the detailed descriptors for each grade and the adherence to a reduced range of acceptable percentage marks within each grade

as a means to ensure consistency across exams and across different assessors.

The mark moderation is carried out by just two people, which is certainly a large burden of work, but which I feel is good for consistency and fairness, and they are to be applauded for taking on that amount of work.

Any borderline students were discussed in detail in the final examiners' meeting, and this process was very fair.

Overall the range of marks awarded reflects the true exam performances of the students and is fair.

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

I interviewed every student, and I asked each one of them about their overall view of the course. Without exception they were very happy and enjoyed the course. In particular, the breadth of the Genetics course was consistently mentioned as one of the aspects that they enjoyed most, and that they hadn't fully appreciated before starting their final year. Several of the students mentioned how this course had opened their eyes to the central importance of Genetics in biology, and how they now feel empowered to apply genetics knowledge and reasoning across other aspects of the life sciences, including medicine.

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

All was in line with my expectations.

Please describe here any recommendations for improvement.

I think there is room for improvement regarding the administration of the Inspira exams. In particular better practice is needed regarding (i) avoiding loss and delay of scanned materials; (ii) reporting of problems to the examiners; (iii) improved advice from the university Examinations Office on how to proceed in the case of lost material and disrupted exams, especially given that students, assessors and examiners may not always be aware that material is lost.

Please highlight any good practice you encountered.

I was particularly pleased with the consistency of grading and the clarity of the marking schemes.

The students all enjoyed their research projects, and this is also a very important part of the course.

The enthusiasm and professionalism of the teaching and administration staff is to be commended.

Have you seen any evidence of grade inflation?

No, I do not believe that there has been grade inflation. None of the students scored higher in their exams than I would have expected based on *viva voce*.

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?

N/A

Do you have any other comments?

N/A