

EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT FORM FOR TAUGHT COURSES

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Name(s) of course(s) examined <i>e.g. Tripos Part/ MPhil/ MRes</i>	Genetics Part II Tripos		
Academic year of examination	2021-2022		
Level (<i>Delete as appropriate</i>)	Undergraduate		
Year of Appointment			3 rd

	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?

This is my third year as external examiner and I confirm that I remain confident about the course in terms of standards and quality. The change in the way that the course is structured into modules appears to have become well established already, despite any additional arising as a result of the pandemic. The course remains one that covers a wide range of topics and where the opportunities offered for contributing to cutting edge research are outstanding.

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)?

This cohort of students has experienced an extremely disrupted period of time in which to do their degree and they potentially have less of a grounding in some core skills/subjects when entering their Part II as a result of this. Given this background, it is particularly pleasing to see the students demonstrate the broad extent of their knowledge and understanding in the written papers. The familiar format (question number, style) for papers I think helps here and it was clear from conversations during the *vivas* that students were very clear about what they should expect.

The procedures for assessment were very good throughout, with care taken to make sure that any outlying questions/papers could be identified and investigated further. We were able to discuss and evaluate individual papers in detail once the overall distribution of marks was known, taking into account the written feedback on each answer that was provided by assessors.

One issue that arose this year was an apparent lack of consistency across papers for particular students, with their performance varying greatly across papers or questions within papers. It is not clear what the underlying reasons for this are, but the detailed information made available as described above, meant that the examining team could be confident that the marks awarded were appropriate in each case.

The *vivas* took place in person, all on the same day in in the same room, and this worked well. I was pleased to have the chance to congratulate students in person on having reached the end of their degree under such challenging circumstances. Most students appeared relaxed but there were some who appeared more anxious. I wonder if fewer opportunities for interactions in-person throughout their degrees might be one explanatory factor here. For example, there may have been fewer opportunities to meet visiting speakers/lecturers in person and ask, or be asked, questions. The benefits to students of these kinds of in-person opportunities I think is worth noting, not least because it takes time and effort to organise these kinds of activities (ask any seminar series organiser) and it is easy to underestimate their value to students and other early career researchers.

In terms of the exam papers themselves, it was clear that they were all well-constructed and whilst they tested the entire breadth of topics taught, there was also scope for students to choose questions that they felt best placed to answer. I was given the opportunity to comment on the questions prior to the exams being set (thank you) and only minor changes were made prior to finalisation of the exams themselves. The overall format works well.

My only comment regarding the process last year related to the length of the individual exams themselves and I suggested that a shorter period might be beneficial. This year I was happy to see that the exams had a much shorter period of time for completion, which I think allowed the students to rest and recover before the next exam 'sprint' rather than effectively running a series of back-to-back marathons.

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)?

I commend, as in previous years, all assessors for their detailed comments on individual answers for each of the papers. All marks and classifications were discussed in detail, particularly with regard to the overall distributions for individual papers, individual markers and for questions within a paper. This discussion was made possible by the careful efforts of the internal examining team and I think was an excellent way to ensure confidence in the assessment process.

We had particularly detailed discussions about marks for students within borderline areas. A great deal of care was taken during these discussions to evaluate all the information available for the written exams. Information from the *vivas* was also included at this stage. As in previous years, *vivas* were undertaken 'blind', with no identifying information about the student's prior exam performance

available at the time, and all students were asked very similar questions. An assessment was made of the quality of their answers and the information was made available at the exam board when discussing whether students with border line marks should in fact be awarded the higher degree.

My only further comment on the process is that the internal examiners have very little time post marks being returned in which to make their analysis of the distributions of exam marks and it is thus a large job with little flexibility as regards its timing. I'm very grateful to the internal examiners for all their efforts in this short space of time.

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 very well with the circumstances under which they have studied. The opportunity for them to undertake a research project was a clear highlight and they welcomed very much the return to a much more normal way of doing things during the past year. I gave them the opportunity to describe changes/additions/ amendments (and to identify problems) but there were clearly no major issues to report here. Some students indicated that they had felt able to raise any issues at the time that they arose during the year.

The overall impression given is that Genetics department staff have created the best possible environment for them to study under the present circumstances and the only significant difference that students reported in their study experience related to college-based levels of support, which seemed to differ somewhat across the colleges involved.

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

All policies appear to be carefully thought through and implemented and I have no specific comments here.

Please describe here any recommendations for improvement.

I have no particular recommendations.

Please highlight any good practice you encountered.

The support system within the department works extremely well in terms of students being able to raise concerns. The research project remains a real highlight and the diversity of options available here I think is outstanding.

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Have you seen any evidence of grade inflation?

I have seen no evidence of grade inflation

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?

I believe I will serve one more year as external examiner due to the exceptional circumstances over the last 3 years. During the time that I have acted as external examiner I believe the course has remained extremely strong, and has incorporated the benefits that were envisaged at the time of restructuring the modules.

Do you have any other comments?

I would like to thank the internal examiners for all their hard work to make information available to me whenever I asked for it, and for the helpful and informative meetings that we held to discuss the assessments.

Thank you for completing the External Examiner 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 a copy to your Chair of Examiners.