General comment

Overall, I am highly satisfied with all aspects of the examination process at Cambridge and the performance of the student cohort in 2011-2012.

The extent to which standards are appropriate for the examination and the qualification

The standards are totally commensurate with the award of an Honours BSc in Pharmacology. The programme content is appropriate, providing a general coverage of Pharmacology at level 2 with a broad range of more specialist topics at level 3. The latter offer the students the opportunity to study areas of contemporary activity in some depth. As expected, level 3 teaching reflects the research strengths of the Institution. The research/dissertation topics offered at level 3 were appropriate and many students completed such work to a high standard.

The extent to which standards are comparable with similar programmes in other UK institutions

The programme delivered in Cambridge is broadly comparable to that of other UK Institutions that I am familiar with as External, or Internal, Examiner, including the Universities of Leeds, Newcastle upon Tyne, Edinburgh and Dundee that also offer named degrees in Pharmacology. Teaching at level 2 contains many of the elements recommended by the British Pharmacology Society (BPS) as being core to the discipline and provides a solid foundation for more advanced study at level 3.

The extent to which processes for assessment, and the determination of wards are sound and fairly conducted

All of the assessment methods are appropriate. Examination scripts are double marked, which is good practice. From the sample of scripts that I reviewed, the standard of marking is appropriate and fair. Similarly, I was totally satisfied with the marks awarded to research projects. I applaud Cambridge for retaining the *viva voce* examinations (sadly decreasing across UK institutions) that allows students with a realistic prospect of promotion to redeem themselves, for example, isolated instances of poor performance in the examinations. I was most happy to recommend the promotion of most students that I interviewed on this basis.

Good practice for further dissemination

A clearly identified board of examiners chaired by a Senior Examiner helps to ensure parity of treatment across the student cohort. This also encourages consistency in the standard of marking.

Design and marking of the examination
Overall this was sound. However, there were two procedural irregularities that I was fully alerted to by the Senior Examiner: 1) one of the four papers contained only seven questions rather than the published eight; 2) one question was incorrectly assigned between the ‘molecular’ and ‘systems’ papers. I investigated the potential impact of these errors on student performance in detail. It is my conclusion that the students were not disadvantaged to any significant degree.

**Strengths and weaknesses of the students as cohort**

Student performance in the 2011/2012 cohort was overall very good indeed. The majority of students were awarded first class, or upper second class honours degree, with relatively small numbers attaining a lower second, classification. This spectrum is essentially what I would anticipate at the University of Cambridge. At oral examinations for borderline candidates that I conducted in the presence of the Internal Examiners, students generally performed very well on the specialised aspects of the discipline that they had studied a level 3. However, I detected weakness in knowledge of more general aspects of Pharmacology delivered in earlier years in some of the students I interviewed.

**Appropriateness of the role of External Examiner**

I consider my role to be entirely appropriate. I was fully briefed on the assessment procedures and had access to all relevant scripts and projects. Moreover, the selection of students for viva was largely at my discretion, aided by the advice of the Senior Examiner. At the Board of Examiners I was invited to express an opinion upon the suitability, or otherwise, of borderline candidates for promotion to a higher degree classification. I felt that the Board gave due consideration to the opinions of the External Examiner.

**The curriculum, its aims, content and development**

The range of level 3 topics presented reflects the strengths in research at Cambridge. All topics are at a suitably advanced level. The wide research base makes for provision of highly suitable of laboratory based projects that enhance the overall degree programme and the student experience and employability. The research projects that I studied indicate that many students adapt well to laboratory research and would be capable of undertaking higher degrees.

**Quality of Teaching and Learning**

As evidenced by the excellent student performance, this is high and should be commended.
Moderating External Examiner Report
MDT1, Medical and Veterinary Sciences Tripos Part 1B
Easter Term 2012
  • Mechanisms of drug action

Herewith I address my report to the Vice-Chancellor:

I visited the department on 11th and 12th June, 2012, having viewed and approved the exam papers in advance. I am familiar with assessment procedure, this being my second year as external examiner.

I was provided with samples of scripts - a good sample of those essay papers immediately above and below the cutoff, and examples of a good first, and clear fails. I was given ample time to examine these scripts.

I prepared notes and questions then met with several members of staff. The outcome was that I was very satisfied that the pass mark was appropriate. The essay-plus-MCQ assessment was the same as previously, and is again commended.

The standard of work was again impressive. The top first was quite outstanding. The examples of other grades were in keeping with my expectations based on standards at KCL.

I conducted a detailed audit of marking accuracy, focusing on one question (practical paper pharmacokinetics question). I discussed this in great detail with the primary marker, and was very pleased with the accuracy and, additionally, the criteria used to assign a mark to this complex question.

This year in the MCQ there was only one question that generated an unexpected preponderance of answers, and this question was deemed misleading and was removed from the assessment. With 124 questions instead of 125, the change had no effect on the exam. Clearly there has been an improvement in the already excellent diligence in the construction of an appropriate exam.

Again, the staff were most helpful and hospitable. There were new staff involved and it was very pleasing to meet younger academics so committed to teaching excellence. Again, I greatly appreciated being guided through the issues without feeling that staff were attempting to influence my judgment, and I was impressed by the professional way in which the staff operated. This is clearly a department with good balanced judgment that continues to be open and accessible to my scrutiny, and committed to its teaching.
I would like to thank the chair of the exam committee, Dr Lesley McVinish, for her excellent organisation of arrangements for my visit, and head of department, Professor Peter McNaughton for his hospitality. Finally, the member of staff who wrote the marks analysis and collation spreadsheet, Dr Stephen Hladky, deserves special commendation for his skill and attention to detail.

Best regards,

Michael J Curtis PhD, FBPharmacolS
Reader in Pharmacology
Moderating External Examiner Report
MDT1, Medical and Veterinary Sciences Tripos Part 1B
Examination September 2012
  • Mechanisms of drug action

Herewith I address my report to the Vice-Chancellor:

I visited the department on 24th September, 2012, having viewed and approved the exam papers in advance. I was reminded of the assessment procedure (method for scrutiny of individual questions in terms of average marks versus the whole, distribution of marks (SD) the preponderance of correct marks for individual questions and the process for determining the pass mark.

I am pleased to report that I agreed with the outcomes for students whose marks were close to the pass mark, above or below. The overall standard of achievement was good. There were no irksome issues, and the process of scrutiny was swift and uncomplicated.

Once again the staff were very helpful and hospitable. I have always been impressed by the expertise, openness and enthusiasm of the department. I would like to add that the rotation of ownership of the process among members of staff ensures a freshness and novelty to each exam that precludes the natural tendency for the external examiner to become jaded.

Best regards,

Michael J Curtis PhD, FBPharmacolS
Reader in Pharmacology