General comment

I am highly satisfied with all aspects of the examination process at Cambridge. The performance of the student cohort in 2012-2013 was very good indeed.

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

The standards totally justify the award of an Honours BSc in Pharmacology. The programme content is highly relevant to the aims of the discipline and as expected covers the scope of Pharmacology at level followed by a very broad range of specialist, but pertinent, topics at level 3. The latter afford the students the opportunity to study areas of current activity in depth. Appropriately, level 3 teaching is geared to the research strengths of the Department and is taught by recognised experts. The research topics offered at level 3 were appropriate and varied. Many students completed their project work to an impressive 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 core elements recommended by the British Pharmacology Society (BPS) and provides a solid foundation for more advanced study at level 3. Standards at Cambridge are high and at least equivalent to other Institutions at which I have acted as an External Examiner.

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

All of the assessment methods are appropriate. The examination scripts are double marked. This is a sound, although for the Staff a time consuming, process. From the sample of scripts that I reviewed, marking was conducted fairly and diligently. I was totally satisfied with the marks awarded to research projects. I applaud Cambridge for retaining the viva voce examinations that allow borderline students (with a realistic prospect of promotion) to redeem themselves from, for example, isolated instances of poor performance in the examinations. The selection of students for viva was conducted fairly and clearly. I was most happy to recommend, with the agreement of my co-examiners present at viva, the promotion of many students that I interviewed. I strongly believe this is an opportunity that should not be lost, has as sadly occurred in many other Institutions in the UK.
Good practice for further dissemination

A clearly identified board of examiners effectively chaired by a Senior Examiner helps to ensure parity of treatment across the student cohort. This also encourages consistency in the standard of marking and a common expectation of the level of achievement required from the students.

Design and marking of the examination

Overall this was sound. Students are presented with a range of short and long answer essay style questions that accurately reflect the material taught and which allow students to express their knowledge in depth. The phrasing of the questions allows students to demonstrate their comprehension of advanced material. Although the marking was undoubtedly fair, I would encourage the examiners to use the entire range of marks permitted.

Strengths and weaknesses of the students as cohort

Student performance in the 2012/2013 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. In a previous report (2011-2012), I noted some weakness in knowledge of more general aspects of Pharmacology delivered in earlier years. I am pleased to report this was not evident in the cohort of students that I interviewed this year.

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 relevant scripts and projects in advance of the viva examinations. 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 careful consideration to the opinions of the External Examiner and the circumstances of individual students.

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, skills base 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 of a very high standard and should be heartily commended.
Moderating External Examiner Report
MDT1, Medical and Veterinary Sciences Tripos Part 1B
Easter Term 2013

- Mechanisms of drug action

Herewith I address my report to the Vice-Chancellor:

I visited the department on 10th and 11th June, 2013, having viewed and approved the exam papers in advance. I am familiar with the assessment procedure (the method for scrutiny of individual questions in terms of average marks versus the whole, distribution of marks (SD) and, for MCQs, the preponderance of correct marks for individual questions.

First business concerned a possibly disruptive influence on one of the examinations in one of several of its locations (musicians in a public area outside the exam room). We explored whether this had affected the marks of the relevant subset of candidates. It was clear from mark analysis that this subset had no: been disadvantaged in terms of average marks versus previous years and versus students taking the paper at a different location. On the other hand analysis also revealed that this subset had no: been unfairly advantaged by the extra 10 minutes they had been provided to answer the paper on the day. With respect to the latter this swift action of staff is commended – it appears to have either met the need of the situation perfectly, or had no influence on a nonexistent problem.

I was very impressed by the way the staff have dealt with the post-exam management of the musician incident, under the leadership of Dr McVinish. I understand that the university has taken steps to ensure that the relevant vulnerable exam venue will not be used again.

My second major piece of business was to examine whether papers on the border, in which small variations in marks could conceivably lead to a pass becoming a fail (or vice versa), had been appropriately marked. I was provided with all of the MVST/MODA3 papers for 3 candidates with top firsts and three with abject fails (the ‘gold standards’ according to their average outcome) and papers of the four candidates immediately above and immediately below the pass mark. We separated each question for this sample group. Two questions (1 and 4) were answered by most of the students. Q1 (medical students) is on hypertension (an area very familiar to me) and served as a good sample question. Unfortunately only one candidate among the selection of falls attempted this question, albeit the answer was clearly eccentric. Q4 was better, with all students among the sample attempting the question, which was on heart failure (and, again, within my area of expertise).
The top firsts’ answers varied somewhat in style and content. This indicates that there is a range of individual marks in any subset selected by average mark. This is reinforced by the range of marks in the cohort of bottom fails. It was clear that the phenotype of the 8 candidates ‘in the middle’ was ‘between’ the firsts and fails. Variability of individual marks contributing to the average for an individual for a paper precludes interrogation of the exact rank ordering of individual essays based on average mark for any useful purpose. I looked up individual marks for Q4 on the draft spreadsheet after having blindly ranked them in order on the basis of a cursory read. My rough and ready ranking exactly matched the rank order of actual marks for the top firsts. For the 8 papers around the border it was harder to judge. However, the digression between my rank order and marks obtained resulted from marks that differed by less than 20%, which is in the typical range for blind second marking. When I reconsidered the papers after re-ordering them, it was clear which two papers were the two with the lower marks. It was interesting that the type of flaw in these 8 answers varied greatly and included omissions, skimpiness, errors and quirkiness in unequal amounts. The two ‘clear fails’ were clear fails.

Overall I am satisfied that the marks awarded are appropriate for specific answers, and appropriate overall in terms of average, spread and standard.

The staff were as always most helpful and hospitable, and once again guided me through the issues without attempting to influence my judgment. They clearly work very hard on behalf of the students with diligent assessment that doubtless reflect diligent and expert teaching and, moreover, work hard to maintain standards year upon year.

Best regards,

Michael J Curtis PhD, FBPharmacoI$S
Reader in Pharmacology
Moderating External Examiner Report
MDT1, Medical and Veterinary Sciences Tripos Part 1B
Examination September 2013

• Mechanisms of drug action

Herewith I address my report to the Vice-Chancellor:

I visited the department on 30th September, 2013, having viewed and approved the exam papers in advance. I was reminded of the assessment procedure.

There was some discussion about the preponderance of fails and I was perfectly satisfied that the marks obtained were appropriate. The outcome was absolutely unremarkable in terms of the statistical distribution of fails one might expect to encounter year on year.

Once again the staff were very helpful and hospitable, demonstrating expertise, openness and enthusiasm, and a willingness to engage. As previously, the present 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