

The University of Leeds
EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT
ACADEMIC YEAR: 2010– 2011

PART A: GENERAL INFORMATION*Subject area and awards being examined:*

School of: English Programme(s) MA in English Literature MA in English Renaissance Literature	Subject(s): awards: (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc.) MA
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The completed report should be attached to an e-mail and sent as soon as possible, and no later than 6 weeks after the relevant meeting of the Board of Examiners, to exexadmin@leeds.ac.uk.

Alternatively you can post your report to:

Head of Academic Quality and Standards,
Academic Quality and Standards Team,
Room 12:81, EC Stoner Building,
The University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT

PART B: COMMENTS FOR THE INSTITUTION ON THE EXAMINATION PROCESS AND STANDARDS***Matters for Urgent Attention***

If there are any areas which you think require urgent attention before the programme is offered again please note them in this box.

Only applicable in first year of appointment

Were you provided with copies of previous relevant External Examiners' reports and the response of the School to these?

For Examiners completing their term of appointment

Please comment on your experience of the programme(s) over the period of your appointment, remarking in particular on changes from year to year and the progressive development and enhancement of the learning and teaching provision, on standards achieved, on marking and assessment and the procedures of the School.

The Leeds English MA programmes are generally in very good health. Across the board, the enrolment figures are strong, and the international recruitment is enviable. That said, there are also quite a lot of modules, year after year, that are allowed to run with very small numbers of students. What happens if we reach a point at which undergraduates are paying £9000 per year to be taught by graduate teaching assistants in groups of 15-20 while PGTs are paying considerably less than that to be taught by professors in groups of three? What might the undergraduates – who at that point will be subsidizing our PGT programmes – say about that?

My experience of externalling over the four years has been fairly consistent. As much as I've tried to establish dialogues, and suggest different ways of doing things, very little has been changed and very little of the School's thinking has ever been communicated back to me. There is nothing wrong with this; indeed it's one recognized model for dealing with externals, especially within departments as strong as English at Leeds. But I have found it somewhat frustrating, since I believe that relationships with externals can be much more productive and creative than this. I also think that the School is simply not

getting value for money from this process. Paying highly qualified people, with ideas and experience from other universities, as much as it does just to tick some boxes seems like a peculiar use of resources.

This sense of frustration has not been helped by the management structures within the School, which remain opaque to me even after four years. The role of MA convenor has rotated at speed, often given to relatively junior members of staff. I have had no contact at all with an assessment/exams officer. I have met a director for learning and teaching at exam boards, who has seemed engaged with comments I have made but with whom I have had no further contact. And I think I'm right in saying that I have had one formal response to a report from a Head of School. As a result, it is never clear who is reading my reports, nor how they are being factored into discussions about the management and strategic development of the programmes. Again, I'd stress that there's essentially nothing wrong about this, but that it feels like a missed opportunity.

Standards

1. Please indicate the extent to which the programme aims and intended learning outcomes (ILOs) were commensurate with the level of the award?

- *The appropriateness of the intended learning outcomes for the programme(s)/modules and of the structure and content of the programme(s);*
- *The extent to which standards are appropriate for the award or award element under consideration.*

The programme ILOs are appropriate. I have complained in the past about the difficulty of locating module-level ILOs. I note that there has been some improvement, but many modules still appear not to have them. I get the impression, rightly or wrongly, that they are being generated for new modules, but that there are a number of older modules for which ILOs were never produced. This seems to me to be a risk, especially for a QAA audit, but also if the School had to deal with a complaint that rested on whether a module had met its commitments to student. Finally, and more specifically, that the ILOs for ENGL5815M seem so slight as to be out of line with the programme ILOs, and reasonable M-level expectations.

2. Did the aims and ILOs meet the expectations of the national subject benchmark (where relevant)?

- *The comparability of the programme(s) with similar programme(s) at other institutions and against national benchmarks and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications.*

I believe that the programmes compare very well to similar programmes with which I am familiar, and are outstanding in the breadth of choice offered to students. I am not aware that there is a national benchmark statement for the discipline at MA level.

3. Please comment on the assessment methods and the appropriateness of these to the ILOs?

- *The design and structure of the assessment methods, and the arrangements for the marking of modules and the classification of awards;*
- *The quality of teaching, learning and assessment methods that may be indicated by student performance.*

I commented last year that the assessment models in Medieval modules seem appropriately rigorous, and make assessment models in many other modules seem slight by comparison. All I can do here is repeat that.

Evidence of student performance in general suggests high standards of teaching.

More specifically, one module that continues to seem slightly problematic to me is 'Reading the Renaissance'. This has the stated objective of 'explor[ing] key issues and debates in Renaissance studies through a series of core texts'. But the essays (and there is just one essay, on a module that could really benefit from a bit more variety and innovation) tend to fall into shapes that one might find on any other module. So what's really distinctive about this module? What really characterizes it as core to the programme?

4. Were students given adequate opportunity to demonstrate their achievement of the aims and ILOs?

- *The academic standards demonstrated by the students and, where possible, their performance in relation to students on comparable courses;*
- *The strengths and weaknesses of the students as a cohort.*

As I have said before, I am not convinced that a model in which students are assessed entirely on the basis of essays and a dissertation is ideal. This is another reason why I like the Medieval modules: there is a greater variety of assessment tasks, which require students to demonstrate a range of skills.

There were some strong students in the cohort, but also some who struggled. The high number of international students perhaps served to drag down average performances; however, in general these students seem entirely capable, so entry requirements seem to be appropriate.

5. For Examiners responsible for programmes that include clinical practice components, please comment on the learning and assessment of practice components of the curriculum

6. The nature and effectiveness of enhancements to the programme(s) and modules since the previous year

It would be particularly helpful if you could also identify areas of good practice which are worthy of wider dissemination.

7. The influence of research on the curriculum and learning and teaching

This may include examples of curriculum design informed by current research in the subject; practice informed by research; students undertaking research.

One question I would ask of the Renaissance programme is whether research interests are perhaps being allowed to have a disproportionate influence on what is taught. Specifically, the Renaissance programme seems to me surprisingly slight in its coverage of seventeenth-century texts: as though staff have followed their own current research interests in the development of modules, without considering more broadly the experience of students.

The Examination Process

8. The University and its Schools provide guidance for External Examiners as to their roles, powers and responsibilities. Please indicate whether this material was sufficient for you to act effectively as an External Examiner?

- *Whether external examiners have sufficient access to the material needed to make the required judgements and whether they are encouraged to request additional information.*

This information was adequate.

9. Did you receive appropriate documentation relating to the programmes and/or parts of programmes for which you have responsibility, e.g. programme specifications or module handbooks?

- *The coherence of the policies and procedures relating to external examiners and whether they match the explicit roles they are asked to perform.*

Yes.

10. Was sufficient assessed/examination work made available to enable you to have confidence in your evaluation of the standard of student work?

Yes.

11. Were the administrative arrangements satisfactory for the whole process, including the operation of the Board of Examiners?

Yes.

12. Were appropriate procedures in place to give due consideration to mitigating circumstances and medical evidence?

Yes.

For Examiners involved in Mentoring Arrangements

If you have acted as a mentor to a new external examiner or have received mentor support please comment here on the arrangements.

Other Comments

Please use this box if you wish to make any further comments not covered elsewhere on the form.

Quality of feedback varies considerably. Some is very good; <<<>>> work I would in fact commend as an example to the School. But some is quite brief, and I wonder about how this may be experienced by students, especially in circumstances where the essay has been the only piece of work submitted in a module. Is, say, three or four lines of feedback really sufficient in such circumstances?

I also encountered a marker on a Medieval module whose feedback seemed extraordinarily casual/colloquial. One might argue that this reflects good relations between the marker and his/her students, and that it works as a pedagogic practice. But it seems risky to me. Feedback is always going to be sensitive, and it only takes one student to take a colloquialism the wrong way in order to produce a complaint. I would suggest that there are places where formality is helpful, and that a feedback sheet will always be one of these.

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9 February 2012

Dear

Many thanks for your detailed and conscientious report. We were pleased to read that you consider the range of choice offered in our programmes here in the School to be excellent and that you thought much of our teaching was of very high quality.

On a more specific level, we are grateful for your attentive point about the need for colleagues to maintain formality in their writing on feedback forms. As you rightly say, this is a good safe-guard against dangerous ambiguities which can lead in the more severe cases to conflict and litigation.

We recognize your perception that we could offer more variety in our forms of pedagogy and assessment and we are busy addressing this after a couple of successful away-days during the course of the last semester in which these topics featured prominently. We are currently bringing suggestions to our TSEC and we hope to have a number of new examples of innovative teaching and assessment in place on our programmes the session after next.

Your comments about the Renaissance MA reflecting the research interests of our colleagues in the area rather than the needs of the students gave us cause reflect as to whether we are getting the balance right in our interpretation of research-led teaching, but after careful consideration we are satisfied that we offer the excitement and challenge of research specialism alongside appropriate induction into the research culture as well as a good coverage of the major literature.

Your more particular point about the Renaissance core module similarly gave us pause for thought about the nature of our core modules in general and led us to consider whether they need to be distinctive in the way you suggest. Again, on reflection, we feel that there is no necessary requirement for a core module to be manifestly different to other modules and that they must be considered more organically and in the full profile of the student's experience.

I was surprised to read that you were frustrated by the limitations of your role here in the School. The function of External Examiner here at Leeds is, in my experience, very similar to that currently operating in many other universities. I have acted in this capacity in a good range of institutions myself in recent years and the remit in all those has been almost exactly the same as

that which pertains here. We are disappointed that you feel frustrated by your experience of acting as External Examiner over the last four years, but thank you for the real energy and commitment you have shown in your commentaries, both in person and in your written reports. As you will appreciate, we also have to balance your predominantly critical responses alongside those of our other – much more positive – External Examiners

Yours sincerely

Head of School