

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) / Module(s): Postcolonial Literary and Cultural Studies American Literature and Culture Modern and Contemporary Literature	Subject(s): Literature 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.

NA

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?

I did not see previous reports for the MAs in Modern and Contemporary Literature and American Literature

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.

NA

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.*

I did not see the ILOs for any of the programmes in 2010/11. Otherwise, the standards on the Postcolonial, American and Modern and Contemporary programmes seemed entirely appropriate to me.

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.*

The programmes I examined are comparable with similar programmes I've examined in the UK.

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.*

Assessment methods are well conceived and consistently applied across the three MA programmes. The use of unassessed essays is a notable area of good practice, allowing students to learn from feedback prior to being assessed.

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.*

The samples of work I saw this year ranged from fail to first-class work with the majority of students achieving marks of 60 and above. Work towards the top end of the grade range (70+) was particularly impressive, and it was clear from the samples I saw that students on all three programmes were being challenged and inspired intellectually.

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

NA

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.

NA

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.

I was particularly struck this year by the innovative work being done on 'Imperial Designs' (Postcolonial Literature MA) and 'Culture and Anarchy' (Modern and Contemporary MA). These modules struck me as highly original and clearly informed by the research of the tutors. More generally, all of the modules I saw this year seemed to me to be grounded in research as well as stimulating student research that, at its best, was pushing at the frontiers of the subject.

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*

It would be helpful to see the ILOs for the programmes next year. Otherwise I was very happy with the provision of guidance and materials.

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.*

(see point 8) Otherwise, I was provided with what seemed to me a comprehensive set of documents relating to each of the programmes / modules, including course outlines and reading lists.

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

Yes, I was provided with a wide range of samples from the Modern and Contemporary MA (Modern to Contemporary and Culture and Anarchy), American Literature and Culture (Writing about Death and Fictions of Citizenship) and Postcolonial Literature and Cultural Studies (Postcolonial Representations, Encounter and Settlement and Imperial Designs). I wasn't sure why I received one more module for the postcolonial programme: perhaps 2 modules per programme is sufficient in future?

I also saw a sufficient range of dissertations to be able to monitor the 3 programmes effectively.

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?**

NA

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.

NA

Other Comments

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

General comments across the programmes:

I was particularly impressed by the consistency of the marking I saw this year, both across the three programmes and within each of them. I saw a healthy spread of marks across the grade range, with little evidence of bunching, and a clear/consistent sense of the boundaries between 50+, 60+ and 70+ work. I was especially struck by the consistency and precision of marking either side of the 60/70 borderline and found marking to be nuanced more generally.

It was not just that grading was consistent. Based upon the evidence I saw, the quality of written feedback is very high on all

three programmes. Comments on cover sheets struck me as balanced, supportive, but also very clear on areas of weakness, and things that might be improved. I got a sense of genuine intellectual engagement with student work through the feedback.

I was similarly impressed by the level of dialogue between first and second marker in almost all cases. The manner in which markers record their assessments to each other before blending comments for the students provides an illuminating level of transparency and represents an area of good practice other schools and institutions could learn from. Clearly second marking is taken seriously on all three programmes and is about more than automatic agreement.

Dissertations: this was an area in which many of the students excelled and is evidence that all three programmes are doing extremely useful work within the academy, generating and turning out independent, critically-minded scholars, students capable of doctoral research.

One area of confusion I did note in relation to dissertations was the inconsistent and ineffective incorporation of visual materials. (see the work of <<<>>> (Postcolonial MA) and <<<>>> (American MA), for example.) These otherwise first-class students both handled visual materials in a slightly clumsy and inconsistent fashion. I would suggest that images should be presented within the main body and chapters of the dissertation, that each image should be numbered as a 'figure' and listed after the contents, and that images (like textual quotations) should not be allowed to speak for themselves but be properly integrated into the surrounding discussion through detailed analysis. I would recommend guidance along these lines be integrated into relevant style guides/research methods training etc, as all three MA programmes clearly encourage students to deal with non-literary materials, including film, painting and so on.

Programme specific comments:

Modern and Contemporary: I thought both 'Modern to contemporary' and 'Culture and Anarchy' were lovely modules producing some really exciting work. I was impressed by the provision of a list of key words rather than questions as the basis for assignments. This pushed the students in ways that I thought intellectually productive. I saw slightly different examples of the feedback form across these samples, but I'm assuming all students are receiving the same version?

American Literature and Culture: <<<>>> piece on Poe was one of the most outstanding pieces of work I've read as external this year, and fully deserved its grade (82). I found some of the feedback on essays on 'Writing about Death' idiosyncratic, with (usually quite brief) comments not always mapping clearly onto marks, and with the second marker sometimes offering more comment than the first. It appeared that the first marker was giving more comprehensive feedback on the script itself (I didn't receive annotated versions of essays, so can't confirm), which is fine. However, this is not really a quibble about the amount of overall feedback. My point here is about the different functions of marginal and coversheet feedback: the former, I would suggest, highlights local concerns and praise paragraph by paragraph, the latter offers synthesised feedback of a more general, overarching character. Students arguably benefit from a balance of both.

Postcolonial Literature and Cultural Studies: I would reiterate my comments from previous years: this is an exceptional programme that is helping to produce some impressive student work. I have nothing to raise this year.

Head of School
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9 February 2012

Dear

Many thanks for your helpful report on our MA programmes in Postcolonial and Cultural Studies, American Literature and Culture, and Modern and Contemporary Literature. This has now been considered by our Taught Student Education Committee. Colleagues are pleased that you write so positively about the range of our marks and the accuracy of our marking; and, more generally, that you feel the students on all three programmes are being properly 'challenged and inspired intellectually'.

You pay some detailed attention to our practice of second marking and we are grateful for your generous comments which draw attention to the way in which we not only offer supportive and focused responses to the work of our students in an act of 'genuine intellectual engagement', but that pairs of markers engage in a rigorous process of interaction before appropriately blending commentaries.

Your reflections on the dissertation work you saw are of particular interest to us. We are pleased that you see evidence of this area producing independent-minded scholars and that work on the dissertations is, as we might hope, providing a likely stepping-stone to doctoral level research.

We note that you did not receive reports from the previous External Examiners for these schemes and we will supply you with these retrospectively. We also apologize for not supplying you with ILOs and will certainly do so in future.

I would like to take this opportunity on behalf of the School to thank you for all your work for us across the academic year.

Yours sincerely,

Head of School