

The University of Leeds

EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2011– 2012

Part A: General Information

Subject area and awards being examined

Faculty / School of:	History
Subject(s):	<i>Modern History</i>
Programme(s) / Module(s):	Modern History MA
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	MA

Completed report

The completed report should be attached to an e-mail and sent as soon as possible, and no later than six 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

No

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?

N/A

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 programme is very successful, attracting a healthy intake of students and offering a course which allows scope for them to flourish, and, in a number of cases, to develop into highly effective researchers, producing dissertations of excellent quality. In my final year as examiner, the mark spread across the cohort was very striking, but this reflects the robustness of the grading and markers' willingness to use the whole scale, as appropriate. I have seen a variety of models in operation regarding the format and assessment of modules, and even, recently, a variety in the ways comments are recorded, through the piloting of electronic marking. Such plurality could, and should, lead to interesting dialogue amongst colleagues in reviewing practice across the programme as a whole. One of the most impressive features of the MA is staff commitment to individual students' progress, their active engagement in dissertation supervision and their pastoral support.

I have been very impressed by the School's response to my comments during my period as external examiner on the programme. Two changes in particular have been especially welcome: the School's discussion about the use of discretion and about its working principles in deliberating on borderlines; and the move to discuss the details of special cases in a separate pre-board meeting, thus retaining a greater confidentiality in the treatment of sensitive, personal information, whilst also freeing up time in the main board itself.

One aspect of procedure surprised me when I began my term – and continues to trouble me – though I understand that it is University procedure, rather than being peculiar to the School. All student work is submitted by name, and the paperwork for the MA board is all presented with named candidates, rather than anonymisation. This, naturally enough, encourages the discussion of individual cases by name during the board. The use of candidate numbers in marking and classification has long been the norm in many institutions – including my own – and Leeds needs to consider why it persists with this practice, and

whether it still wishes to do so.

The School uses rather confusing forms of paperwork in the administration for the programme – and I often had to draw up my own marksheets when a batch of coursework was sent out, trying to make sense of different component marks and the interventions of moderators. Some simpler formats for recording the marks could make things clearer – but these are minor matters which may find their own resolution as electronic marking potentially becomes more widespread. These quibbles apart, the programme is clearly in capable hands, offering an interesting and very varied portfolio of subjects and approaches, and allowing students the opportunity to work at a high level, with committed and supportive members of staff. Some of the dissertations I have read at Leeds have been of the highest quality, sometimes already of publishable standard, and demonstrating their authors' clear ability and preparedness to proceed to doctoral study. The MA in Modern History is a very effective programme, offering students a training in advanced historical study, research skills and critical engagement with the literature of the discipline.

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 ILOs were appropriate for a Masters award.

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.*

Yes.

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.*

The School has been experimenting with more diverse forms of assessment, including shorter exercises and presentations.

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.*

Yes.

The cohort embraces a mix of abilities, exploring the full range of the mark scheme. The best dissertations are particularly strong, showing the students' ambition and focus in mastering an area of historiography, defining well-thought-out research questions, and engaging in serious primary research.

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

N/A

6. Please comment on 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.

The programme has not changed greatly between my 3rd and 4th years as examiner. It works very effectively as it stands. I have always found members of staff very ready to reflect on their own practice and consider ways to review and continually improve their modules, in coverage and assessment.

7. Please comment on 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.

Both the specialist and the research skills and survey modules are clearly informed by the range of research in the area of modern history within the School. The variety of approaches and geographical coverage are particularly notable.

For Examiners involved in mentoring arrangements

8. If you have acted as a mentor to a new External Examiner or have received mentor support please comment here on the arrangements

N/A

The Examination/Assessment Process

9. **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.*

Yes

10. **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, marking criteria?**

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

Yes

11. **Were you provided with all draft examination papers/assessments? Was the nature and level of the questions appropriate? If not, were suitable arrangements made to consider your comments?**

Yes

12. **Was sufficient assessed / examined work made available to enable you to have confidence in your evaluation of the standard of student work? Were the scripts clearly marked/annotated?**

Yes. I was provided with all the written coursework, and with reports on presentation elements.

13. **Was the choice of subjects for dissertations appropriate? Was the method and standard of assessment appropriate?**

Yes.

14. **Were the administrative arrangements satisfactory for the whole process, including the operation of the Board of Examiners? Were you able to attend the meeting? Were you satisfied with the recommendations of the Board?**

Yes. I attended the meeting and was very happy with the conduct of the business and the constructive nature of the discussion.

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

Yes.

Other comments

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

From:
To:
Cc:
Subject: Your Report as External Examiner
Date: 09 January 2013 12:28:41

Dear

Thank you very much for your report as External Examiner on our MA in Modern History. I am pleased that you continue to approve of the overall MA scheme, to have a high opinion of the students' work, especially of their dissertations, and to have confidence in the quality and robustness of the marking. I shall share these comments with my colleagues.

You raise two points for our attention. The first, about the 'rather confusing forms of paperwork' in the marking process, I have already drawn to the attention of our administrators, and we shall review this issue. It may be that the formats for recording the marks are clear to us through long usage, but less so to an outside observer: however, I shall press for greater clarity and uniformity, which is obviously desirable.

Your other, and more substantive, point was about the issue of anonymity. All student work is marked anonymously, and the students are only identified after the marks have been confirmed for the classification process. At this point the marks cannot then be changed. The examiners' meetings then deal with special circumstances and the classification of students whose marks place them near a borderline. In the latter case we have clear guidelines as to our practice, and both here and with any students who may face special circumstances we are guided by the advice of the external examiners, who by definition do not know any of the students concerned. This is in accordance with University rules, and I am confident that the system is fair and unbiased, and that individual students are neither advantaged nor disadvantaged. I shall, of course, pass your comments on to higher authority; but as a School we must be guided by University practice.

Finally, I would like to thank you for all your work as external examiner over the last four years, and to say how much we have valued your comments, your input into the examination meetings, and your help with the often sensitive special cases we face. We are most grateful for your assistance, and hope that we shall continue to have contact with you in future years, especially through the White Rose network.

With very best wishes,

Professor of Medieval History,
Head of School,
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Leeds LS2 9JT