

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):	
Programme(s) / Module(s):	MA Social and Cultural History
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

n/a

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

n/a

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 aims and the ILOs are commensurate with MA level expectations. The programmes are well-conceived and well-structured and include a wide range of modules covering appropriate training in core skills as well as providing opportunities to develop more specialised interests, and candidates undertake dissertation projects involving sustained and independent research appropriate for this level of 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.*

The programmes are comparable to similar programmes that I have taught at Glasgow, Cambridge, and Sussex, and externally examined at Edinburgh. The Aims and ILOs of the MA Social and Cultural History at Leeds meet the expectations of the QAA Framework for Higher Education Qualifications pertaining to a Master's degree (Level 7).

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 assessment methods are for the most part very well designed and support the ILOs of the programme. There is an exemplary range of assessment methods, including seminar presentations and coursework essays to the extended piece of independent research demanded by the dissertation. The 'applied theory' exercise, while an excellent initiative, might be trimmed to be more manageable for students (or expanded into a more heavily weighted and lengthier piece of assessment). The introduction of the VLE postings in 'Cultures of Knowledge' is a particularly commendable addition to the range, encouraging students to engage in regular writing and reflection.

The students clearly are beneficiaries from high quality teaching supporting broad chronological coverage and which is reflected in the innovative topics selected for dissertation research, and in most cases students had been encouraged to undertake an ambitious range or depth of primary research. In a few of the dissertations there was greater scope for discussion of sources and methods, as several failed sufficiently to outline from the outset the central goals of the project and how they were to be approached in relation to existing secondary literature of relevance, which suggests that some of the lessons central to the core research skills training undertaken by students are not being carried on to their dissertation research.

The assessment criteria were mostly consistently and rigorously applied. There was, however, scope to use a fuller range of marks in assessing both coursework essays and dissertations, as the marks clustered a little too heavily in the mid-60s range to create a relatively low borderline between a merit and a pass. In addition, the full range of marks in the 50s might be moved to differentiate different kinds of 'pass'. Finally, one dissertation in particular raised the issue of the extent to which sustained engagement with a body of primary sources should be a basic requirement of the dissertation. It would be helpful for students and examiners alike if this could be clarified in the assessment criteria for dissertations outlined in the MA postgraduate handbook.

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 academic standards demonstrated by the students spanned a range of abilities from pass to distinction, albeit clustered in the merit band, with only one pass and one distinction. This compares less well with last year when half the cohort achieved distinctions. At the top end, however, was some outstanding work -- in particular the dissertation by candidate <> which achieved an extremely sensitive reading of a complex body of source material and demonstrated impressive critical acuity and a deft ability to relate the analysis to wider social and cultural as well as historiographical contexts. At the weaker end of the spectrum work was poorly presented and insufficiently researched.

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. 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 remains strong, as it was last year, and impressively so given it is only in its second year. As an innovative and effective form of assessment, the VLE postings assigned by the 'Cultures of Knowledge' course (mentioned above) are an example of good practice worthy of wider dissemination.

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.

Curriculum design is clearly up to date with current research in the subject; the courses offered stem directly from the research expertise of members of the department; and the students are trained in undertaking primary research as a core component of the programmes.

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

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?**

n/a

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 saw all the written coursework submitted for the relevant modules, and all the dissertations for the programme I examined.

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

Yes. There was a good range of topics. In general the standard of assessment was appropriate, although see my comments above about the degree to which the presence/absence of sustained primary research should be rewarded/penalised.

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?**

A change over in support staff led to some confusion over who the administrative contact was in relation to this programme. I was able to attend the Board of Examiners meeting which was conducted with exemplary efficiency and care.

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

Yes. A meeting prior to the Exam Board enabled due consideration of relevant cases.

Other comments

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

From:
To:
Cc:
Subject: MA Examiner's Report
Date: 29 November 2012 10:42:56

Dear

I write to thank you for your report as external examiner for the MA in Social and Cultural History, which I have read with great attention and which I shall submit to the School's Taught Student Education Committee. I am pleased that you approve of the programme, teaching and assessment of this course.

You raise three important points in your report (1) the size and / or weighting of the 'applied theory' exercise (2) the need for markers to utilise a fuller range of marks, and (3) the need for a sustained engagement with the primary sources to be more clearly embedded in the assessment criteria for the dissertation. I shall ask the colleagues teaching on this MA course to address the first of these points; remind all colleagues of the importance of the second; and ask the Examinations Director and Taught Student Education Committee to review the assessment criteria as you suggest. Thank you very much for raising these important issues.

We very much appreciate all your work as external examiner, your careful moderation of the examination process, and your advice about the often complex special cases which arise each year. We look forward to working with you again next year.

With best wishes,

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