

## The University of Leeds

## EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2012– 2013

**Part A: General Information****Subject area and awards being examined**

|                               |  |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Faculty / School of:          | School of Modern Languages and Cultures                                  |
| Subject(s):                   | Russian  |
| Programme(s) / Module(s):     | Modules with SLAV prefix, at levels 2 and 3 for Joint Honours Programmes |
| Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc): | BA   |

**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](mailto: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*

There are no matters requiring urgent attention.

**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 ILOs were fully commensurate with the level of the 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.*

I have been external examiner at many UK (and Irish) HE institutions; on the basis of this extensive experience and my own experience within the subject I am confident that the programme is fully comparable with equivalent programmes at other institutions.

**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.*

In assessing work at Leeds, I had the opportunity to consider a very wide range of assessment methods. These included oral presentations in Russian, translation from and into Russian, free composition in Russian, grammatical exercises; extended essays on a variety of topics, and lengthy dissertations. Clearly, considerable thought had gone into the design of the assessments (particularly within the language work): judging by this very extensive and varied evidence, I am confident that the design and structure of the assessment methods are fully appropriate.

Marking and classification were also exemplary. The standard of achievement by students was very good indeed, and in a variety of ways: some of the student work I saw was amongst the best I have seen anywhere, and I would especially single out the final year dissertations, which allowed the students to display flair, individuality and originality. As I remarked during the examiners' meetings, this does not happen by chance, and I was impressed by the quality of the teaching that clearly underpins this level of performance. Here I would wish to single out for praise the quality and type of feedback provided to students. This is often very detailed and predominantly typed, both of which attributes are to be commended. Unlike last year, I attended the Orals and was very impressed not merely by the students' linguistic attainments, but by their research and presentational skills as well.

**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.*

See 3 above. In addition to my comments there, I would also note that the level of linguistic attainment by some students was outstanding, with the marks in some language modules being exceptionally high. As noted above, the performance of some students was the best I have seen anywhere. I did not detect any significant weaknesses. Stand-out achievements were in language work, especially the final-year oral, the dissertations and year-abroad projects. I would again emphasise that the *variety* of types of assessments allowed *all* students the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities and achievements.

**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.*

Some modules had been modified and updated and this 'refreshment' of the offering is to be welcomed.

**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.*

The influence of research was clearly manifest in the modules on Russian (New) Media and Dostoevsky, as well as elsewhere: these and other modules produced some very interesting and unusual student work. Leeds has several research-active members of staff who are pre-eminent in their fields, and this is clearly manifest in the impacts on student learning. In reverse, however, I noted with regret and a little concern the relative dearth of 'mainstream' nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian literature and history. I am aware that student and staff numbers constrain the viability of wider offerings, but I would also suggest that creative ways might be investigated to diversify provision in non-language areas.

## 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.*

I received sufficient guidance to perform my role effectively.

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.*

In the course of the academic year 2012-2013 I received module handbooks, marking criteria and so on for all the modules that I would be moderating, so I can say that I did indeed receive appropriate documentation relating to the programme for which I had responsibility.

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?

I received draft assessments, and was able to comment on them as relevant. The questions and assignments were appropriate, and changes were made when I suggested them.

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?

I had made available to me, I think, ALL assessed material for levels 2 and 3. In sampling these materials I would say that the scripts were clearly marked, and, as noted above, the system of feedback is excellent. I would say that I have confidence in my evaluation of the standard of student work.

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

This area was one of the outstanding aspects of student work. Dissertations were written, many to a very high standard, on a very wide range of topics, including HIV, The USSR in US Films, Dostoevsky and Plato, Dostoevsky and Solzhenitsyn, as well as works dealing with 'Yugoslav' and Arabic (Egyptian) culture; press coverage of the theatre hostage crisis; the use of the internet by politicians, even the Russian insurance market. The opportunity for students to choose their own very individual topic is an excellent feature, and facilitates real excellence; the method and standard of assessment were entirely appropriate.

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?

The administrative arrangements were completely satisfactory for the whole process. The operation of the Board of Examiners was exemplary; I was able to attend the meeting, and I was satisfied with its recommendations. After some glitches in arrangements in 2011/12 I am very pleased to report that arrangements for this year were excellent and problem-free.

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

At the Board of Examiners there were references to various cases of mitigating circumstances, and these were properly discussed. I was also informed of the way that the mitigating circumstances and medical evidence systems operate at Leeds. Procedures in these areas seem entirely satisfactory..

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

In my report last year I raised a number of issues and I am pleased to report that the most serious of these, the use of the so-called 'base-room' has been modified. I am very pleased that Leeds staff have been responsive in this matter, and I feel that I was able to execute my role much more efficiently and effectively this year.

In addition to the comments above I would like to add the following by way of summary of the overwhelmingly positive experience of examining at Leeds, as well as to raise a couple of ongoing concerns. These comments will summarise and develop what I have already said.

**A. General remarks**

As in my first year I have been very positively impressed by almost all aspects of my work for and at Leeds University.

I have received all appropriate materials and information in good time so that I have been able to conduct my work as external examiner for Russian in an appropriate manner.

I have found all staff at Leeds, administrative and academic alike, to be welcoming, responsive and highly professional. I perceive relationships between staff and students to be excellent as is evidenced by the overall standard of work that I have seen and, especially, by the conduct of the Orals.

Last year I commented on the fact that I had found the 'base room' system unsatisfactory for a variety of reasons. Leeds responded to this and so, at my request, I have been sent materials on three occasions, in March, May and again later in May (when I collected the dissertations at the Orals). This has greatly improved the conditions in which I have been able to work, and has moved Leeds closer in line with national practices.

I have been sent a great variety of materials, essays, examinations, presentations materials and some other materials. In all cases, I have been impressed by both the standard of student performance and by the level of professionalism of the marking. This last comment is the case in several respects: standards of marking are consistent, both internally and across modules, and as against national criteria and benchmarks. The quality and helpfulness of feedback is very good, and it is good to see that almost all of it is typed.

Student attainment is high with a significant proportion of students achieving first class marks, and very few marks at the lower end of the scale, with even fewer fail marks, except for technical reasons (for example, late submission). This level of attainment betokens both a high level of ability amongst students, but also high quality teaching and guidance.

While all the work has been of a high quality, I would especially like to comment on the Orals and dissertations.

I attended all the Oral exams this year, as observer alongside the two internal examiners, <> and <>, on 29-30 May. This was a most enjoyable, informative and impressive experience.

The examiners conducted the exams with complete professionalism and expertise. They ensured that all candidates were put at their ease, while maintaining a proper air of seriousness. While naturally a number of candidates were anxious and nervous, the examiners did all they could to reassure them.

The whole process was impressive. In particular, while giving presentations has been standard practice at many universities for many years, using a PowerPoint was an excellent addition, which required the candidates to demonstrate a variety of transferable skills. While mixed in quality, even the worst of the presentations were interesting and of value, while some were outstanding and were clearly the result of considerable effort and research. I was slightly surprised, though, that there is no approval process for the topics, although the subject matter did not present any difficulties.

Indeed, the range of topics was truly impressive and included Superstitions and Portents, The Cosmos, Terrorism, Racism in Football, North Korean Work Camps within Russia, Irish Dance, for which we even had a demonstration, *The Great Gatsby*, and Rape. As is implied by this list, not all topics were Russia-themed, and I have no problems with this. Just one thing to consider, though: would *any* topic be permissible?

Naturally, the standards varied quite markedly, with two thirds, and the majority, 10/22 in the 2,1 band. There were 7 firsts, and two very remarkable performances, with one candidate scoring a near perfect 89. All in all, this was a very impressive occasion which spoke of excellent tuition and excellent work by the majority of students - especially as most, I think, came to Leeds as beginners.

I would say, indeed, that, the highlight of my involvement with Leeds this year has been my attendance at the Orals. I would like to propose that it be an expectation that a ML examiner attend the orals in their language at least once.

**Dissertations**

As with the Orals there was again a very impressive range of topics: again though I am not sure what the approval of title process is. Topics included HIV, The USSR in US Films, Dostoevsky and Plato, Dostoevsky and Solzhenitsyn, as well as works dealing with 'Yugoslav' and Arabic (Egyptian) culture; press coverage of the theatre hostage crisis; the use of the internet by politicians, even the Russian insurance market (in Russian)! – it is great to see such diversity! There is very ample and helpful feedback for all the work I've looked at. The students' work itself also displays very high levels of expertise, reflecting once more the high level of input from supervisors.

## B. Individual Comments, Suggestions / Recommendations

1. I noted above the very constructive and usually typed feedback that staff have given students. I understand, though, that Leeds has no policy on typed feedback; I would suggest that you move towards the position that all feedback be typed.

2. As I also commented last year, I gather that almost all Russian modules are only completed in the course of the year, that is they are, to use the parlance, 'long-thin' modules. I suppose one of the implications of universities moving to semesters and modules was to create distinct units of learning that students would complete and then move on at the end of the semester. The situation at Leeds seems to be at variance with those principles.

3. I understand that it is because of the numbers problem, but there are not very many modules available to Russian students beyond language. For example, the only literature module available this year at Level III is one on Dostoevsky. If the university could think of creative ways to diversify the offering of Russian modules beyond language, I am sure everyone would find that helpful.

4. Last year I commented on the 20-90 system, and received an extensive commentary on it from Geoff Barker-Read; in fact two, after I responded to the first with further comments and questions. He concluded the second set of remarks as follows:

In an institution in which students have considerable flexibility within their programmes of study to choose modules outside their main discipline we must have a classification system which allows these different marking traditions to be combined fairly. *With hindsight, our choice of a 20-90 scale may not have been the best decision. Likewise, allowing schools to choose whether to mark student work using either an additive (0-100%) or a judgemental (20-90) scale does increase the potential for confusion. But both positions are strongly defended by their proponents and a hard-fought compromise solution that no-one really likes is what we have to live with.* (my italics)

While I now understand the 20-90 system better than I did last year, and it no longer seems so idiosyncratic, it is manifestly, by Leeds' own admission, far from satisfactory, and clearly different from the simpler percentage system used more or less throughout the British education system. I therefore urge you to consider moving to that system.

# School of Modern Languages and Cultures

FACULTY OF ARTS



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

09 August 2013

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**re: External Examiner Report – 2012-13**

Dear <>,

Many thanks for your External Examiner report and helpful feedback on our modules and procedures. I am pleased to hear that the administrative side of your visit ran smoothly this year and that the combination of base room and scripts posted in advance enabled you to feel confident that you were able to fully evaluate student performance. We are also very pleased that you were able to attend the Final Year Orals: we welcome your detailed comments about the experience and will certainly extend the invitation to future Externals within GRASS to attend the examinations at least once during their term of office.

I am delighted that you found our programmes to be in line with good practice elsewhere and particularly gratified to learn that the performance of students in some areas is the best you have encountered – this is particularly valued given your extensive experience as an External. I note your concern about the restricted choices of content modules available to our students and you can be assured that the Russian team will continue to consider ways to make the best possible use of our resources to meet the needs of the students. Our research expertise is, as you note, available to students in the supervision of their Final Year dissertations, which allows them to pursue an area of research beyond what can be offered by the curriculum.

I note your positive comments about the standards reached by our Finalists on the Dissertation module in particular and your kind remarks about the variety of assessment and the standard of feedback given to students, as well as your very positive comments about their performance in the Oral examinations.

Thank you for sharing your concerns with us – on the 20-90 scale, we will pass on your comments for consideration by the SMLC as this is not a change we would wish to make in isolation, especially as by now most of us are used to using it. Your suggestion that all feedback should be typed is understandable and would certainly help to make feedback both legible and readily available. However, in a School where modules sometimes have well over 200 students, it is not possible to

introduce an expectation that all feedback should be typed without strong opposition. We certainly have a policy that all feedback should be clearly legible and could add 'preferably typed' to this without placing an undue burden on colleagues or becoming an exception within what is now a unitary School.

On behalf of the whole of GRASS I would like to thank you for your insightful comments on draft assessments sent during the year, your careful scrutiny of student work and our practice as well as your helpful intervention in individual cases. We look forward to working with you again during the next academic year and to seeing you again next summer.

Best wishes,

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Director of German, Russian and Slavonic Studies

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