

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:	Biological Sciences
Subject(s):	
Programme(s) / Module(s):	MRes / MSc Biodiversity and Conservation
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	MRes / MSc

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

. Evidence of marking project reports – see report.

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

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.*

Aims and Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) were 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.*

The programmes are commensurate with those at Exeter and they meet national benchmarks and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications

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.*

Appropriate and satisfactory.

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 – satisfactory.

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.

Programme is largely unchanged since last year.

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.

Clearly research informed – especially in the independent projects.

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.*

All satisfactory.

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 – excellent service from the office.

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?

No, but examinations are not a component of these programmes.

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 saw examined work – there were serious shortcomings in annotation and feedback on projects.

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

Yes – excellent.

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 – all fair, appropriate and well conducted.

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

See attached report.

Faculty of Biological Sciences
Graduate School

University of Leeds
Garstang Building
Leeds LS2 9JT



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

14 January 2013

Dear

EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT 2011/12: MRes/MSc Biodiversity and Conservation

Thanks for your detailed and thorough examiner's report, and for agreeing to act as our external examiner for one further year.

Your report highlighted some major issues that needed to be addressed and I outline our responses below.

There were serious shortcomings in annotation and feedback on projects in a small number of cases. We are in the process of revising our project marking/feedback scheme currently. Together with (re-)emphasising to staff the importance of justifying the marks they give, we have instigated a monitoring system whereby the office vets comments and if there is any question of their suitability the module manager will be informed and will request appropriate additions.

A target for the coming year is to improve the level of synthetic discussion. The project module manager will stress the importance of this to supervisors ahead of the marking period.

Module handbooks did not contain assessment criteria for all of the major assignments. We have a wide range of formats of assignments, which we consider to be a strength, but this does mean that we do not have formal written criteria for assignments that are non-standard. From discussions with staff, verbal descriptions of what is expected are often given at the time that assignments are set, but we will request that module managers examine where more formal guidelines can be introduced. We will collate existing criteria and make them available for your next visit and implement further more formalised guidelines for the 2013-14 session.

Stylistic flaws in presentations. Students are provided with opportunities to practice powerpoint presentations and are provided feedback on them. The module manager has asked tutors this year to emphasise the need to reduce excessive text on slides, and to emphasise 'take home messages'. If possible, we would like to provide opportunities for some of this year's talks to again be viewed in September 2013.

A collectively poor experience in one module, Conservation Genetics. We have held discussions with the manager of this module, who is reviewing all aspects of the module, including assessment and content. In addition, [redacted] will be mentoring this module, and will attend some of the teaching sessions.

Yours sincerely,

Director of Taught Graduate Student Education

Design of programme and modules:- the curriculum is largely unchanged since last year and I continue to be impressed by this programme's relevant core modules and the wide variety of options that allow students to acquire specialist skills. The modules offer a wide range of learning activities and assessments with standards appropriate to masters level. The project is a particularly valuable experience and I am very impressed by the quality and range of study experiences that you offer the students, many of which involve an association with conservation agencies. The student cohort spoke very highly of the training provided by this programme.

The independent research projects are well designed and question-driven and have produced experimental/quantitative investigations with good opportunities for a wide range of data analyses.

Quality of student work:- This year, I focussed on borderline project reports at the merit/distinction threshold. The three borderline projects that I read were clearly of 'merit' standard when marked by University <> standards. Project reports marked as 'distinction' were generally appropriately marked.

Like last year, a target for the coming year is to improve the level of synthetic discussion – too many discussion sections initially focus overmuch on detailed results or the limitations of the techniques without considering first the 'big idea'. In this way, some reports vary from the conventional scientific paper. The quality of synthesis should become more clearly a hallmark of distinction-level work, but progress towards this has not yet been made.

Academic standards:-

The academic standards are appropriate and broadly match awards made at the University <>. The top students have produced outstanding work and clearly deserve their distinction awards.

For the last two years, I have suggested that project markers make great use of the available mark range, particularly at the top end. Disappointingly, I found no evidence that this had occurred <>.

<>

The consequences of this are that you miss an opportunity for your top students to carry substantive recognition and that, possibly, the 'pass' award is underused – less than <> of the cohort received a pass mark for their project report this year. Your best students will benefit from the clearer badge of excellence on their transcript that a higher project mark could provide.

This year, I had no concerns about mean module marks <>.

<>

<>

Quality of written feedback:-

It is disappointing that no progress has been evident last year to my request to improve the level of feedback on the project, which is a substantive and culminating piece of work for the student.

Feedback on some projects was, frankly, unacceptably brief <> and completely inadequate as a justification for the mark awarded. The lack of annotation on the project itself means that there is no evidence that the report has been read.

Module handbooks did not contain assessment criteria for all of the major assignments. The programme staff should look at improving this aspect.

Student experience:-

I attended eight student presentations and saw MRes poster presentations and I discussed the experience of the programme with groups of students in two one-hour sessions on 12th September 2012.

I present my evaluation in two sections: (a) positive findings; and (b) areas of concern

(a) Positive findings

i. Taken collectively, the presentations and posters were of the standard I would expect at this level.

ii. I observed the assessors using mark schemes.

The students complimented various aspects of the programme, including:

iii. The choice of modules and especially the opportunity to acquire valuable skills (certificates in tree climbing, chainsaw use, etc.) and to undertake field project overseas.

iv. The excellent service provided by the <> and <> team in the Graduate Office, and especially the use of Facebook.

v. The clear lines of communication between staff, student representatives and the student cohort.

vi. The Malham field course, which gave students the chance to meet.

(b) Areas of concern.

The students raised some concerns, including:

vii. A collectively poor experience in one module, <>, which included perceived shortcomings in: the level and delivery of teaching; the conduct of some assessments; the timeliness of assessment feedback. (These reports seemed unusually serious to me.)

Note: I have since analysed the marks awarded for this module and I have no serious concerns about academic standards <>.

<>

viii. Unsatisfactory levels of responsiveness to e-mail enquiries and of availability for meetings in several lecturers and project supervisors (e.g. reportedly, one project supervisor did not respond over a period of months to repeated e-mails from a student who was working overseas);

ix. Variability among modules in the consistency of marking and clarity of feedback for assignments in similar format (e.g. essays, presentations). Many students reported being unclear about how to get a distinction mark.

x. I saw some recurrent stylistic flaws in the presentations.

Materials provided to examiner:- I was given access to marks and student work in good time and the programme staff were very helpful. The meeting with the students was well organized and well attended. I had the opportunity to discuss and clarify my views with the programme staff and to discuss matters with students.

Action on last year's Examiners report:-

I am deeply concerned about lack of progress on two longstanding recommendations:

1. To increase discrimination among student performance (i.e. the spread of marks) - particularly on project reports.
2. To improve the consistency and quality of feedback to students on assessed work.

Summary of recommendations:-

1. Ensure that External Examiner's reports generate action by programme staff.
2. As a matter of urgency, improve the quality of written evaluations on student projects. In support of this, I strongly suggest that you redesign the maker's form and abolish the section-wise breakdown of marks.
3. You should improve the student experience in <>. This should include providing regular peer support to the lecturer and ensuring that at least one teaching session is observed.
4. You should formulate a set of norms for student-staff contact (e.g. "lecturers will normally respond to e-mails within X business days and schedule appointments within Y business days") and publish these in the student handbook with instructions on the complaints procedure. And notify the staff.
5. You should provide marking criteria for all generic assessment types: essay; presentation; and project report. These should indicate the distinguishing features of

work at each level (pass, merit, distinction). The criteria should be published in the student handbook and notified to markers.

6. You should check the consistency of training in PowerPoint presentations, including providing specific guidelines on wordiness on slides and on the need for a clear 'take home' message.

