

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

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

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?

Yes

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

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 programme and module ILOs were appropriate for the level of the awards. The structure and content of the modules were appropriate for the awards offered.

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.*

From my direct experience at Sussex as well as acting as external examiner in other institutions (e.g. Imperial College London), I consider the aims and ILOs to be comparable with similar programmes elsewhere and meeting 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.*

Assessment methods are both varied and challenging and are entirely appropriate for the ILOs. I found the arrangements for the marking of modules to be very thorough and transparent, although please see comments below about marking practice and the classification of awards.

It is clear that the quality of teaching is of a very high standard, as demonstrated by impressive performances by many students.

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.*

Students were given ample opportunity to demonstrate their achievements. I consider the overall performance of the students to be at least as good as on comparable programmes at other institutions, and in many cases much higher.

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.

I was not the external examiner last year, but I gather that the programme is largely unchanged.

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.

It is clear that much of the teaching is heavily informed by research, most particularly in the choice and supervision of the research projects/dissertations.

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 was given access to all the materials that I needed to perform my duties as external examiner. Ad hoc requests for further information were dealt with promptly.

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.*

I received appropriate documentation for the programmes as a mixture of hard copy, electronic files and access to materials available on the university server; together, they amounted to everything I needed to perform my role. Excellent support from the administrative and academic staff, especially in the briefing session.

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?

These programmes are not assessed by unseen examinations. I was not sent draft coursework assessments for comment, but I would not have expected this.

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 access to representative samples of assessed coursework for all modules within the programme. I was also provided with hardcopies of all the research project reports. This enabled me to perform my duties, but see comment below regarding access to work submitted by borderline candidates. The amount of annotation on scripts and projects was somewhat variable; some were heavily annotated, others much less so.

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

Yes, all dissertation subjects were appropriate. Methods and standards of assessment were appropriate also.

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 entirely satisfactory.

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

1. Whilst I was given access to samples of coursework for scrutiny, which was useful for overall marking-quality assurance, these did not always include work submitted by candidates in the borderlines. My contributions to the discussion of borderline candidates was therefore essentially limited to an assessment of their projects. If timings allow, my suggestion would be to collate all the work of borderline candidates so that the external examiner can inspect the performance of each of these candidates across the complete spectrum of their work.
2. The marking schemes that have been developed for assessing project reports and presentations (including detailed descriptors for each grade category) are excellent. I found the implementation of these schemes, however, was rather variable. Some examiners had circled a whole cell in the table, others had highlighted particular phrases or sentences, whilst in a few cases there was no indication at all of which cell had been selected. Likewise, annotation of project reports was variable in extent and depth; some had many and detailed annotations, while others had none. Where there were no marginal annotations in the text, the summary comments on the marking sheet did not seem to be correspondingly any more extensive. Consistency in the amount and depth of comments/feedback is extremely hard to

achieve, but I suggest that some guidelines to examiners on what is expected might be helpful.

3. I was brought in as external examiner somewhat late in the annual cycle, so I did not have the chance to meet any of the students as had been the practice when I was external examiner some years ago. This was a pity as I had previously found meeting the students to be a very valuable part of the process. This was clearly unavoidable this year, but I would certainly recommend it be made part of the external examiner's visit in subsequent years if at all possible.
4. I am uneasy about the criteria for discretion in MSc classification, specifically at the merit/distinction boundary. This is currently based exclusively on the number of credits gained in the higher class (and a maximum number of credits in lower classes). No consideration is given to the class of the project/dissertation. As the project is a heavily weighted assessment (one third of all credits), my view is that it should be taken into consideration when deciding whether to elevate a candidate to the next higher class (as is the case for MRes candidates). I think this is particularly important at the merit/distinction boundary. By way of illustration, there was one borderline candidate this year who was elevated to a distinction on the basis of the number of credits in the distinction class, even though the project report was marked at 62% and constituted the candidate's lowest mark.

**Faculty of Biological Sciences
Graduate School**

University of Leeds
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Leeds LS2 9JT



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Our Ref:

28 November 2013

Dear

EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT 2012/13: MRes/MSc Biodiversity and Conservation

Thank you for your report and for the generally very positive comments on our programmes. We are also very grateful to you for agreeing to act as External Examiner for this year at short notice.

Your report highlighted a few issues for consideration, and I outline our responses below:

Access to work of borderline candidates

We note that you would have liked to see a fuller range of work from borderline candidates. We do not routinely keep copies of marked work for all candidates, but unmarked electronic copies of much of the work of each candidate are kept, and in future years we will aim to collate this and make it available to the external examiner.

Marking schemes and annotation

We will highlight to staff the importance of highlighting individual sentences in the new proformas and providing more detailed feedback in the box provided, particularly for project reports.

Meeting students

As you note, this was unfortunately not possible this year. We usually invite the external examiner to meet the students, and we will continue to do so in future years.

Discretionary criteria

We note your concerns about the discretionary criteria, in particular the fact that project performance is not taken into account for the MSc. The rationale for this was we felt that the MSc classification should reflect the overall performance rather than performance in any specific module (for instance, students above the borderline are not required to achieve the higher grade in their project). Another possibility would be to increase the number of credits needed in the higher classification – this would make it harder for students without a distinction level project to be raised up, but would not rule it out if they had a very strong performance in non-project modules. We will discuss this further at the programme review meeting, with a view to revising criteria for the 2014-15 session.

Yours sincerely,

Director of Taught Graduate Student Education