

The University of Leeds

EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2013-2014

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

Faculty / School of:	Biological Sciences
Subject(s):	<i>Biodiversity and Conservation</i>
Programme(s) / Module(s):	MSc/MRes Biodiversity and Conservation
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	MSc/MRes

Name and home Institution / affiliation of Examiner**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 Quality Assurance**
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

None

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

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 aims and ILOs are appropriate for the awards of MSc and MRes. The programme provides a broad range of modules, covering theoretical approaches in ecology and conservation, field courses and practical skills, and the projects provide students with opportunities to bring together these skills and knowledge to carry out relevant research studies.

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.*

This programme is comparable to other MSc programmes covering similar topics elsewhere in the UK. There is perhaps greater coverage of practical conservation and identification skills than other programmes but these are important skills of direct relevance to future employment, and are nicely complemented with more conceptual modules.

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.*

A broad range of assessments are available through the modules, testing a variety of skills and using approaches of relevance to future employment in the area. The marking and classification procedures are clear and appropriate. Student performance on the assessments indicates a high level of engagement and understanding, reflecting very good quality teaching.

The number of coursework items within each module seemed to be quite large, and it may be that there is some room to streamline the coursework assessment. It may be that each individual coursework item is necessary for student progression within the modules, and the providing feedback on these coursework items is not particularly onerous, but the programme organisers may wish to consider whether reducing the number of coursework items in some modules would be appropriate.

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 of the students were clearly demonstrated in their coursework marks and in the projects, which were all of a good standard and tested a wide range of relevant skills, including field, lab and analytical techniques and writing and presentation skills. The performance of the students was comparable to those on other institutes, with similar proportions achieving pass, merit and distinction to those at UEA. The cohort seemed fairly typical, with a high level of engagement and knowledge such that few module failures were reported, and a range of abilities was reflected in the range of marks.

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 cannot yet comment on enhancements as this is my first year as EE.

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 very strong research base of faculty involved in delivering this programme is clearly evident in the excellent curriculum design and delivery. This is particularly true in the research projects, many of which are directly linked to ongoing research by faculty and thus benefit greatly from background knowledge, existing data and established logistics. The involvement of staff

from external organisations in the delivery of projects is also a great strength, as this will enhance understanding of real-world conservation issues and constraints, and can provide excellent networking and employment opportunities.

8. Where the programme forms part of an Integrated PhD, please comment on the appropriateness of the programme as training for a PhD

N/A

For Examiners involved in mentoring arrangements

9. 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

10. 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, I had access to all necessary materials, with the inevitable exception of the occasional marksheets for projects with extensions.

11. 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, I had access to all relevant materials for the programme, including handbooks, module descriptions and marking criteria.

12. 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

13. 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?

Only research projects are available for scrutiny but these and the associated marksheets are sufficient. Some marksheets were handwritten and difficult to read, so encouragement of faculty (at least those with illegible handwriting) to type comments would be helpful to the EE and the students receiving the feedback. In a few cases, the amount of feedback on projects was quite minimal, but in general the feedback was good and appropriate.

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

Yes, the range of subjects available for projects was appropriate and impressive, and the standard of assessment was thorough and appropriate. A small number of projects resulted in very small datasets of a largely descriptive nature (ie the projects on primate reintroduction in Belize), which may have limited the students' capacity to use and show the analytical skills they have gained from the modules. Efforts to identify such projects early enough to ensure a study design with sufficient data-gathering capacity should help to avoid this problem in the future.

15. 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 arrangements were satisfactory. I did attend the Exam Board meeting and I was satisfied with all recommendations.

16. 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

One possible concern is that students taking mainly skills-based modules could be less well-prepared for projects with a strong analytical requirement, which may then require substantial supervisory time and/or disadvantage the student. If this is considered to be a problem by project supervisors, then it may be worth considering some means of 'badging' projects according to their prior module requirements.

Faculty of Biological Sciences
Student Education Service

Student Education Office
Irene Manton Building
University of Leeds
Leeds
LS2 9JT, UK



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

17 November 2014

Dear

RESPONSE TO EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT 2013/14
MRes/MSc Biodiversity and Conservation

Thank you for your report and for the generally very positive comments on our programmes.

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

Assessment load

We note your comments on the number of coursework items within each module. We will discuss this at our annual programme review meeting, to see if there is scope for reductions in some modules. We note that the modules with the highest number of coursework items are analytical modules (statistics and GIS), for which the structure is to have a sequence of relatively small pieces of coursework, allowing students to learn from feedback during the module.

Annotation of marksheets

We will encourage all staff to use typed comments, especially for project marksheets, and to provide sufficient feedback. We will also make a wider range of marked coursework available next year in advance of the final meeting.

Research projects

We note your concern that some projects may not allow students to demonstrate their analytical abilities, and that some students may be less well-prepared for analysis-heavy projects. The former issue arose this year with respect to the three primate projects highlighted, for which an external organisation in Belize suggested the project topics. We are keen to continue to offer such projects, which provide valuable field experience in primate conservation, but will liaise with the partner organisation at an early stage to ensure that there is scope for students to collect sufficient data. The latter issue is not considered to be a major problem, as any specific skills needed for a project are usually discussed with students during the project selection process.

Yours sincerely,

Faculty Director of Student Education