

The University of Leeds
EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT
ACADEMIC YEAR: 2010– 2011

PART A: GENERAL INFORMATION

Subject area and awards being examined:

School of:	Faculty of Biological Sciences	Subject(s):	Biodiversity & Conservation
Programme(s) :	Biodiversity & Conservation	awards: (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc.)	MSc/MRes

The completed report should be attached to an e-mail and sent as soon as possible, and no later than 6 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.

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?**

Yes – all appropriate to award

2. **Did the aims and ILOs meet the expectations of the national subject benchmark (where relevant)?**

Yes – broadly comparable to University of Exeter awards

3. **Please comment on the assessment methods and the appropriateness of these to the ILOs?**

The programme uses a wide range of assessment methods that both test and train students

4. **Were students given adequate opportunity to demonstrate their achievement of the aims and ILOs?**

Yes – a wide range of assessment points and performance matched aims and criteria

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. **The nature and effectiveness of enhancements to the programme(s) and modules since the previous year**

The programme team had improved the training for writing scientific reports

7. **The influence of research on the curriculum and learning and teaching**

The programme shows a clear input of research into teaching and is delivered by a research-experienced staff. The students interact closely with research labs during their independent projects

The Examination Process

8. **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?**

Yes – material was entirely sufficient

9. **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?**

Yes – I had access to and used handbooks and conventions

10. **Was sufficient assessed/examination work made available to enable you to have confidence in your evaluation of the standard of student work?**

Yes – I had access to a complete and well-organized collection of student work

11. **Were the administrative arrangements satisfactory for the whole process, including the operation of the Board of Examiners?**

Yes

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

Yes.

For Examiners involved in Mentoring Arrangements

If you have acted as a mentor to a new external examiner or have received mentor support please comment here on the arrangements.

Other Comments

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

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:- the module assessments and project reports were generally of a high standard. Among the project reports, the best had publication quality text, and the great majority that I sampled were of 'merit' or 'distinction' standard when marked by University of Exeter standards.

The project reports are consistently set out in journal format, which is a significant improvement from 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 could become more clearly a hallmark of distinction-level work.

Academic standards:-

The academic standards are appropriate and broadly match awards made at the University of Exeter. The top students have produced outstanding work and clearly deserve their distinction awards and the merit and pass awards are also appropriate.

There is a minor ambiguity in the assessment conventions of the MRes about what criteria must be fulfilled by a borderline candidate in order to receive the higher award – specifically, whether one or both criteria should be met. This year, we operated based on consistency, but formally it needs correction.

Last year, I suggested that project markers make great use of the available mark range, particularly at the top end. I found no evidence that this had occurred (Fig. 1).

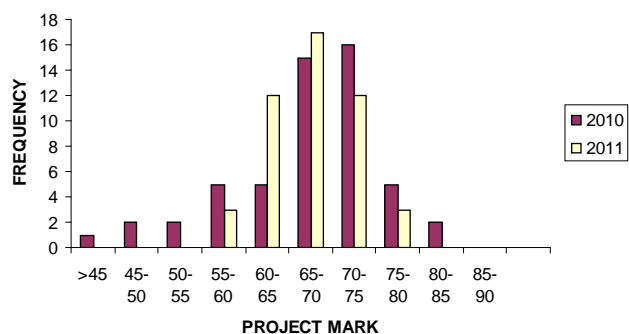


Fig 1. Marks awarded for MSc project reports 2010 vs 2011.

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 5% of the cohort received a pass mark for their project report this year. I graded your best projects at 78-85%, but you graded them at 75-76%. In particular, the markers comments on the best project are: ‘Excellent ... Excellent ... Publishable!’ – I think this warrants greater recognition as I don’t think more could be expected at MSc level in the time available. Your best students will benefit from the clearer badge of excellence on their transcript that a higher project mark could provide.

Two modules each taken by about one third of the cohort had mean marks close to 80% (79%, 77%), which is generally higher than the rest.

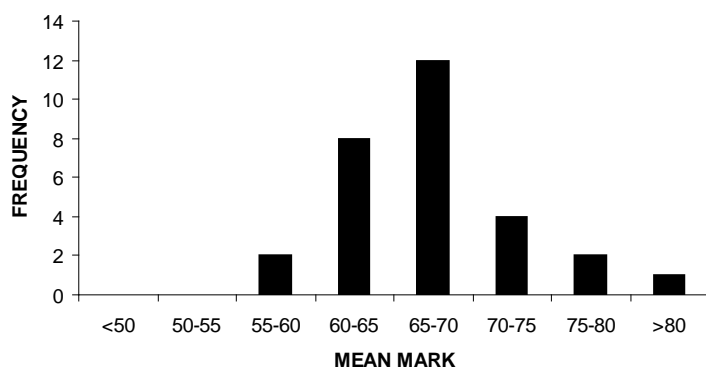


Fig. 2. Mean marks of modules in MSc B&C. The highest mean mark (>80%) is in a module taken by only a single student in this cohort and I do not consider it further.

Virtually none of the students at award borderlines had taken both, and the award cut-offs are therefore reasonably robust. Nevertheless, this did cause uncertainty in certain borderline cases because of a possible advantage due to module choice. Furthermore, one of the modules had already had its marks moderated downwards (Population Dynamics), which is an unsatisfactory experience for the students and raises an unnecessary concern about the security of marking. Programme staff should seriously consider how to eliminate these outliers.

Mitigation and extensions are handled centrally by committee to ensure parity, which is a sound arrangement.

Quality of written feedback:-

Please give attention to improving the level of feedback on the project, which is a substantive and

culminating piece of work for the student. Feedback on one of your best projects (which was outstanding) was along the lines of: 'Good job ... Clearly presented ... Very good' in a series of boxes. Please give thought to producing at least a typed summary paragraph that could communicate more clearly to a student their level of achievement.

Quite a few major pieces of assessed work in taught modules either did not have a feedback sheet or it contained comments that were typically telegraphically short. It is not clear to me how students can improve based on this level of feedback.

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 met with about twenty five students, including part time, MSc and MRes representatives. The students were highly complimentary about their experiences on the programme. However, they did identify some aspects that could be improved for the year ahead:

- The programme handbook should provide up-to-date and definitive information
- Students should have access to up-to-date records of their current marks
- Students should be provided in advance with the assessment criteria for their final project dissertation
- Students should have clear information about the absences of their project supervisor and about the alternative support available
- Timely return of marks from extra-mural markers must be more effectively assured

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 could clearly see an improvement in response to some of last year's recommendations - to ensure consistently high quality of project proposals and to improve the consistency of the format in which project reports were written.

However, other recommendations had not been fully addressed:

1. To increase discrimination among student performance (i.e. the spread of marks) - particularly on project reports.
2. Whether the mean mark of any module is a justifiable outlier.
3. To improve the consistency and quality of feedback to students on assessed work.

Summary of recommendations:-

Programme staff should consider the following:

1. How to increase discrimination among student performance (i.e. the spread of marks) - particularly on project reports, perhaps by examining marking criteria.
2. Whether the mean mark of any module is a justifiable outlier.
3. How to improve the consistency and quality of feedback to students on assessed work, perhaps by examining the form and use of generic feedback sheets.
4. How to improve the student experience through improved programme administration.
5. Correct the ambiguity in the MRes assessment conventions relating to award borderlines.

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UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Our Ref: DTGSE/AD/CME

28 November 2011

EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT 2010/11: MSc/MRes Biodiversity and Conservation

Thank you for your thorough appraisal of our masters programmes in Biodiversity & Conservation, and in particular for your largely positive remarks on the content and delivery of the programme. We also note with pleasure the highly supportive comments that you received from the students themselves.

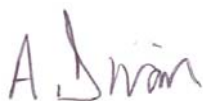
Projects are perhaps the single most important element of the programmes. You note that a common weakness of the project reports is a lack of broad synthetic discussion. Supervisors will be encouraged to give appropriate guidance and feedback on the first draft. Additionally, the module handbook will contain more information about the structure and content of the final report and students will be encouraged to learn the appropriate style from the papers that they read. We will also re-assess our project marking criteria with a view to providing a scheme where there is greater spread of marks awarded. This also applies to other modules. Generic assessment criteria for essay type questions will also be investigated.

You note that two modules have consistently awarded higher marks than the rest. One of these (Population Dynamics) has now changed its method of assessment for 2011-2012. The second module (Insect Identification Skills) has already been completed for this academic year. A provisional mean mark of 72% has been awarded, with marks ranging from 50% to over 90%. While still high, this mean is not as extreme as in some previous years. Changes to the content of this module are also being considered.

The wording ambiguity in the criteria for upgrading borderline MRes students will be corrected.

We will/have already addressed some of the concerns raised by students (the programme handbook for 2011-2012 has been fully updated for example). Their concern over the speed of return of marked assignments is justified, but remains a continuing issue. We have amended our guidelines for returning marked work for 2011-12 and will now endeavour to return marked work within 3 weeks in stead of 2 to provide a more accurate reflection of the time taken to mark lengthy and complex pieces of Masters level work. This timeframe will be closely monitored by the Graduate School Office with timely reminders being sent to staff. Students will be kept informed of when they can expect to receive feedback on their submitted work and interim feedback where possible will be provided.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Aysha Divan
Director of Taught Graduate Student Education