

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

PART A: GENERAL INFORMATION*Subject area and awards being examined:*

School of: POLIS Programme(s) / Module(s): <u>Programmes:</u> <u>Modules:</u>	Subject(s): Politics/International Studies awards: (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc.) BA MA
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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.

n/a

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

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 level of study: the curriculum is well designed, intellectually robust and covers all the main pillars of the discipline; there is an excellent choice of modules and the content is invariably stimulating and interesting; module outlines contain all relevant information for students relating to programme aims, ILOs, modes of assessment and so on.

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.*

Yes. The curriculum is consistent with national benchmarking guidelines and comparable with other leading institutions in the UK. The breadth and depth of module choice is perhaps the outstanding feature of the programme. The quality of the teaching and student performance appears to be very high.

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.*

Although there is some variation in modes of assessment between different modules and programmes (in terms of the balance of assessment, weighting of essays, role of seminar presentations and so on), overall the structure and design of assessment methods are excellent. The range of essay and exam questions is in line with programme aims and ILOs as set out in module outlines. Assessment sheets accompanying essays provide for extensive feedback, inviting tutors to comment on both the 'formative' and 'summative' aspects of the essay. What is especially impressive is just how much time staff have demonstrably spent on providing feedback. As with the undergraduate programmes, there is also plenty of evidence that the system of double marking and internal moderation is both robust and effective.

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. POLIS is clearly producing some outstanding students. The work I read this year - and in previous years - is comparable with other leading British universities. Even average students appear to have been instilled with a very clear ethos of how to approach postgraduate study - and how to prepare, plan and execute an MA dissertation. At least one of the dissertations I read this year was close to publishable standard - a clear indication that the best students are being given the opportunity, training and support to fulfil their academic potential.

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

It would be particularly helpful if you could also identify areas of good practice which are worthy of wider dissemination.

n/a

7. 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.

Yes. There is evidence that modules linked to the expertise of individual tutors. This was especially evident in the best dissertations, which of course reflects close and conscientious supervision.

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?

- *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. The communication and timely distribution of sample work and teaching/assessment documentation has been fantastic.

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?

- *The coherence of the policies and procedures relating to external examiners and whether they match the explicit roles they are asked to perform.*

Yes. All programme specifications, a copy of the External Examiner's Handbook, module outlines and exam papers were received.

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 was given a representative sample of scripts for each module. The distribution of this sample work was efficient and received in sufficient time for me to read and comment on the scripts. Advance warning of the examination period was also received in good time. I would again like to comment on what a brilliant job the Examinations Secretary <<<>>> – alongside the other administrative and academic staff – has done this year in ensuring that the examination and external moderation process runs smoothly.

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

Yes. As above. I was also like to thank MA Director <<<>>> for doing a great job chairing the exam board and reporting how POLIS has responded and acted on the recommendations provided by myself and the other external examiners in previous years.

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

Yes. The pre-exam board was held immediately before the main board. The external examiners were present at both meetings. All cases involving mitigating circumstance/medical evidence were discussed at length and student confidentiality was respected at all times. The process was thorough and transparent.

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.

n/a

Other Comments

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

This is now the end of my second year as an external examiner for POLIS. As with the undergraduate side of things, POLIS has an excellent set of MA programmes, with an impressive range of modules for students to choose from. The quality of the student work is, in many cases, outstanding and comparable with the best teaching outlets for Politics and International Studies in the UK. The amount and quality of student feedback remains one of the most outstanding features of POLIS. Last year, I did raise the issue of the way in which the awarding of merits and, more importantly, distinctions is based on a simple weighted average without granting additional significance to the dissertation. This meant in some cases students were awarded a distinction overall without achieving a distinction for their dissertation while other students who did receive a distinction for the dissertation fell just short because their overall average was below the bar. This anomaly was again evident this year with one or two rather strange results. But as I commented last year, there is no perfect system for calculating grades; however, I would like to see POLIS keep this issue under review with a view to perhaps considering in the future elevating the status of the dissertation as the 'centrepiece' of the degree. The only other comment I had during the exam board was in relation to the double marking procedures: although, as noted above, the amount and quality of feedback is one of the real strengths of POLIS, just occasionally I felt that the overall summary sheet could be a bit more explicit where there has been a difference of opinion between the two markers – in particular, when the final grade comes down closer to the preference of one of the markers, and where the change is significant (e.g. a change of class), I would like to see a brief note of explanation of rationale behind the final grade. Although students may not necessarily need to see this, I do think it is important for the purposes of transparency and accountability. Finally, I was very pleased to see that my recommendation for introducing a 'best dissertation' and 'best student performance' prize, to bring the MA programme into line with the undergraduate programme, has been implemented.

7 December 2011

Dear

MA External Examiner's Report 2010 – 2011

On behalf of the School, may I thank you for your Examiner's Report which was discussed by colleagues at the School Education Committee on the 16 November 2011.

Thank you for your praise for the "brilliant job" done by <<<>> and the other admin staff in their work to ensure the exam process runs smoothly and efficiently. You described the exam board process as "thorough and transparent" and that reflects well on the work of MA Director <<<>>.

It is reassuring that you consider the quality of teaching and student performance on our MAs to be very high and that our marking and feedback are also effective and of a high standard (in fact you describe the amount and quality of feedback to students as "outstanding"). You can be assured that we will be working hard to continue to meet the required standards here. You said that you would like to see more explanation given to externals when internal markers have disagreed and I hope that in the future the mark sheets that you see will reflect that.

You comment that the evidence is that dissertations at POLIS receive close and conscientious supervision and that the best dissertations are of a very high standard. You go on to raise the issue of the weight of the dissertation in the calculation of the overall degree result and suggest that it should have a special status and weighting. There is a "Rules for Award" document on the University of Leeds website: <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/qmeu/>. Section 1 'Principles', contains text in sections ii) and vi) that make it clear that classification should be on averages and weighting can only be in relation to credits. Our external examiners have expressed different views on this matter and while we have no plans to change our practice at the moment we will keep this issue under review.

Finally, you describe our programmes as 'excellent', with an "impressive range" of modules. You will be aware that we are revising our MA schemes but can be assured that we will want to retain the strong features that you have recognised and acknowledge.

May I take this opportunity to thank you for the time and effort that you have invested as our external examiner in ensuring that the programmes and modules offered by POLIS are commensurate with the standards offered in comparable institutions.

Yours sincerely

Head of School