

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:	POLIS
Subject(s):	Politics
Programme(s) / Module(s):	British Politics/Parliamentary Studies/British Foreign Policy
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	MA

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?

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

Throughout my terms as External Examiner at Leeds, I have been consistently impressed at the range and quality of postgraduate taught programmes in POLIS, which both provide a highly attractive choice of Masters degrees for students, and reflect the research interests and expertise of the Department's staff. I have also been greatly impressed by the very high standard of teaching, the intellectual calibre and motivation of POLIS's postgraduate students overall, the robust assessment and marking regime, and the diligent conduct of the Postgraduate Exam Boards, which have always been chaired with the utmost efficiency.

There is clearly a consistent process of annual review and enhancement, entailing the annual Examiners' Reports and recommendations within them, as well as consultations between External Examiners and programme directors or Module leaders if and when any changes are proposed.

The marking regime, entailing a judicious blend of second marking of Dissertations, and 'moderation' of a sample of essays and exam scripts, has worked extremely well, and has ensured consistency, equity and transparency in the marking process.. Throughout my term as External Examiner, I have received a letter from the Head of POLIS, informing me the Department's response to my report for the previous academic year, and detailing how any issues raised by me have been addressed. As such, I have felt included and taken seriously throughout. I have also been enormously impressed by the enthusiasm, professionalism and responsiveness of staff in POLIS, academic and administrative alike.

The Exam Boards themselves have always been conducted with due diligence; each student's transcript of marks has been presented, and any extenuating circumstances or mitigation noted. Particularly close attention has also always been paid to students whose final mark falls within the 'discretionary boundary', to determine whether they warrant being awarded a higher degree classification. As such, every Postgraduate Exam Board decision and recommended award or degree classification has been clear, consistent, equitable and absolutely defensible both on academic and regulatory grounds.

My only minor concern or quibble is that throughout my tenure, there has been a tendency for the best individual marks for assignments to be at the bottom of the 70s range (70-73), when, quite often, a mark in the 75-80 range would have been academically warranted. This has been especially true with some of the Dissertations I have received. I appreciate that sometimes, an overall average mark might emerge as 70 or 71, which is perfectly reasonable, but here I am talking about an individual assessment being awarded a 70 or 71, for example, when a 75 or more would be justified. I wonder if this is linked to the 20-90 marking range which Leeds University adopts, which perhaps subconsciously, make staff reticent about approaching the higher end of the 70s range or above, because they feel uncomfortable about awarding a mark which is near the maximum permissible (in the 80s range), and so hold back in the 70s, and the low 70s at that.

Finally, as I end my tenure, I would like to reiterate my appreciation of the administrative support provided to academic staff, Externals and students in POLIS. Throughout my tenure as External Examiner, I have found <> to be the very personification of cheerful efficiency, support and sage advice.

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 Aims and ILOs are fully commensurate with the relevant national benchmarks and the FHEQ. They are also readily comparable to similar PGT programmes at other Russell Group universities, two of which I am also an External Examiner at.

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 Aims and ILOs are fully commensurate with the relevant national benchmarks and the FHEQ. They are also readily comparable to similar PGT programmes at other Russell Group universities, two of which I am also an External Examiner at.

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.*

As this is a Masters programme, it is entirely appropriate that the final mode of assessment should be an in-depth research-based Dissertation. This rightly evaluates the students' research skills, their capacity to interpret and evaluate a range of primary sources, and to develop a sustained and in-depth analysis which offers originality either in terms of the Dissertation topic selected or the conclusions which the students arrive at after conducting their research. This is entirely as it should be at M Level.

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 dissertations I received saw clearly demonstrated the high academic standards and research skills being attained by the vast majority of the students on this programme. Undoubtedly, their level of attainment was at least of the same level as that of students on similar programmes at other Russell Group universities.

There were no weaknesses among the student cohort that I could discern.

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.

As I was strongly impressed and completely satisfied with the objectives and operation of the programmes and their component Modules, I did not feel it necessary to make any recommendations for enhancement last year. This remains the case this year too.

POLIS continues to offer a range of intellectually stimulating, academically robust and clearly popular suite of Masters programmes, and these rightly attract high calibre students who are then taught and supervised by enthusiastic academic staff who are renowned experts in their respective fields.

In terms of good practice, I am extremely impressed by POLIS's system of double-marking, Internal Moderating and the extensive Dissertation feedback which is provided, both to the students and External Examiners.

The programme also benefits from the excellent management and administrative efficiency consistently provided by <> and <>.

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.

As these were dissertations on a Masters programme, it was evident that the students are being imbued with excellent research skills, and that these are being further nurtured through the very high standard of dissertation supervision which POLIS staff are providing throughout the summer.

Many of the students choose very imaginative and interesting topics for their Dissertations, and produce some high quality research and written work as a consequence.

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.

As always, I received all the relevant documentation and materials at the start of the academic year. These clearly outlined my roles and responsibilities as External Examiner, and provided the information which enabled me to fulfil my duties with confidence.

I was informed that additional information or advice would be readily provided if I requested it, but this was not necessary, due to the comprehensive and detailed content of the guidance I received at the start of the year, which addressed all relevant issues and procedures.

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, absolutely, as indicated in the previous answer (10)

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?

Yes, all draft Examination Papers and Assessed Essay titles were sent to me for comment and approval. The nature and level of the Questions were always appropriate, and any recommendations by me were minor, and mainly stylistic, not substantive.

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?

Yes. The marking (first and second) and feedback was clear and extensive, and made it clear both to the students and myself why a particular grade had been awarded, in accordance with the Programme's Marking Criteria and the ILOs..

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

Yes. I was again hugely impressed by the range and nature of the topics which postgraduate students selected for their Dissertations. These are invariably a very interesting mix of contemporary issues and more esoteric topics which stretch them intellectually, and further develop their research skills.

Whatever Dissertation topics have been selected, the method and standard of assessment have consistently been appropriate.

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?

As it has always been during my tenure, the Postgraduate Exam Board was chaired and conducted with the utmost efficiency. Each candidate's marks and final award were clearly presented, thus enabling the External Examiners to see how each decision had been reached. As such, each student was treated carefully and fairly, with the final mark and award being agreed unanimously by all present. Special or exceptional cases were highlighted so that academic discretion could be exercised in appropriate cases, albeit strictly in accordance with University Regulations. Consequently, I was completely satisfied with all the awards and recommendations made by the Exam Board.

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

Yes, absolutely.

Other comments

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

4 December 2014

Dear

External Examiner's Report 2013 – 2014

On behalf of the School, may I thank you for your Examiner's Report which was discussed by colleagues at the POLIS Taught Student Education Committee meeting on the 19 November 2014.

Your report is a hugely positive one and your comments about the quality of our programmes, the high standard of teaching, the extensive feedback, and the management of the marking process and the exam board, are much appreciated – and you can be sure that we will be working hard to maintain these high standards. Your praise for is well deserved! You picked out the MA dissertations for demonstrating high academic standards and research skills and this element of our programmes will remain important in future years, even as our programme portfolio develops and changes. Your only concern (you called it a “minor” one) concerned marking at the bottom of the 70s range for distinction level work. You quite rightly say that marks in the mid or upper 70s or higher may sometimes be warranted and we are working to get that message across to colleagues.

May I take this opportunity to thank you for staying on an additional year, and 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

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