

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): PIED 5702M: 5604M: 5524M: 5632M: 5785M PLUS 2 dissertations	Subject(s): Politics and Political Theory awards: (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc.) 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.

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.

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 intended learning outcomes for the programmes and modules being examined and the structure and content of the programme were entirely appropriate for the subject matter being taught. Moreover, the standards are also appropriate for the awards and the elements under consideration – i.e. as related to politics and political theory being taught at Masters level.

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 various components of these programmes offer a very wide range of areas to be studied at post-graduate level, both in relation to subject content and in the philosophical and theoretical approaches used. In the process this component also offers a masters student at POLIS a rich and varied learning environment and experience which is to be very much commended, and compares favourably with other institutions, as well as national benchmark standards, 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.*

Students progress and enhance their depth of learning across the taught programme, culminating in a dissertation presented at the end of their studies. Assessments are generally in the form of written essays, with the stress (quite rightly) being on the development of writing and analytical skills, as well as a very strong emphasis on the enhanced development of what might be called 'independent/original thinking' skills. The standards achieved are impressive across the modules. In particular, I was very impressed by the students' abilities to clearly state and robustly defend an argument throughout their work which certainly reflects the high standard of teaching being delivered at POLIS in relation to politics and political theory. I was also extremely impressed by the standard of feedback across the modules I examined and the attention to detail in respect to second marking procedures. The arrangements for the marking of modules seem entirely appropriate and the procedure for classifying awards was very transparent and especially attentive to including, in a very constructive and collegial manner, the various views of examiners across the post-graduate taught programmes.

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.*

As previously stated, the modules I examined reflected the overall good/very good work submitted, and so certainly student achievement compares favourably with those on similar courses. Again, as previously stated, I was impressed by the students' abilities to clearly state and robustly defend an argument throughout their work which certainly reflects the high standard of teaching being delivered at POLIS in relation to politics and political theory at this level. In addition, I was also impressed by both the writing and analytical skills of students, and the capacity top-grade students had to be independent and original in their thinking. However, there were times when students were tending to 'steamroll' their arguments through with an under-developed attention to the consideration of counter-argument, and detailed analysis – although, quite rightly, this was reflected in the reduced grades awarded (especially perhaps in relation to the two dissertations I examined).

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.

Although it is possible that some legitimate efficiency gains may be possible if the number of modules were reduced, it seems that the very wide range of subjects and modules offered reflect the research interests of staff, and no doubt contributes to the attraction of niche subject areas, which is also very important for the successful marketing of programmes at Masters level. Moreover, it is clear from the depth of understanding many students are able to achieve, and the quality of feedback given to students in the development of the knowledge and understanding indicates that there is a close relationship between staff research interests and curriculum design – this is all to the good, and I would recommend that this should be continually monitored and further developed to ensure this excellent practice continues. Although I only examined two dissertations it is clear that these candidates' research interests were supported very well by staff's knowledge and expertise.

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.*

The information given via the administrative processes and those responsible for its administration was wholly sufficient for me to make the required judgements. I was also encouraged to request additional information, and as a result of such requests, always received prompt and clear replies.

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 – in all cases – and the policies and procedures are coherent and were matched against the explicit roles I was asked to perform.

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

Yes – and completely.

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

I was very impressed by the administrative arrangements including the operation of the board of examiners. I especially appreciated the pre-board meeting held to discuss border-line classification cases which included external examiners. This process was very transparent in its chairing and enabled the board to be very consistent in the way decisions were made regarding classifications and mitigating circumstances, helped by regulations from the institution about how to handle such cases (but see my other comments below regarding institutional regulations).

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

Yes absolutely – see 11 above.

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.

There are two comments I wish to make in relation to institutional regulations and procedures, and one comment concerning POLIS's development of assessment criteria for Masters students.

First, regarding the classification rules for Masters, there were occasional anomalies, or at least issues which raised possible concerns, relating to the specific award given. As commented at the exam board, no regulation for classifying border-line cases can eliminate all anomalies, and my comments below should be read with this caveat in mind. Nevertheless, there is I believe an issue worth raising, and was also discussed at the exam board – namely, that border-line students may still legitimately receive the higher classification award, according to University of Leeds regulations, even if the dissertation has a mark which is clearly in the lower band. Correspondingly, it is possible for other border-line students to receive a lower classification, after consideration of University of Leeds regulations, even if the dissertation is clearly in the higher band. Of course, acknowledging this as a concern is dependent on giving the dissertation a higher status than the taught modules, which is certainly a controversial claim for any taught Masters programmes. Nevertheless, for my part, I think there is a case to be answered here, as for many, the dissertation alternatively represents the pinnacle of student work, and as such, this should be reflected in regulatory procedure for border-line cases. To clarify, this comment in no way reflects a criticism of the exam board, as it was rightly at pains to apply existing regulations consistently to all students, and as such was implementing very fairly these rules – however, regarding the rules themselves, the issue remains, and I believe should prompt further discussion across the school and wider institution.

Second, a few cases came to light during the exam board of student plagiarism, with details being given of the response by the institution to particular cases. I wish to state that how the institution deals with these cases is extremely clear and seems very robust and effective, with students being treated, I believe, very consistently and appropriately. I was particularly impressed by the range of penalties administered, giving flexibility to specific cases according to particular circumstances and the level of offence, but at the same time the institution was able to give a very clear message to *all* students that these practices are always serious offences, and so are not to be tolerated.

Third, in relation to school practices, previous to the exam board, examiners were sent by POLIS a *Post-Graduate Assessment Guide* prepared for the 11-12 session. This document outlines in considerable detail, how students should submit work, expectations regarding the work submitted, and assessment criteria, etc. The document is, as a result, very useful, and no doubt will be invaluable to students, markers, and external examiners alike. However, in the process of the school being very transparent in its guidance for assessments (which is to be highly recommended), it has also perhaps exposed a basic question regarding how the relationship between undergraduate assessment and Masters assessment should be viewed – namely, what makes a Masters assessment and grade different to an undergraduate assessment and grade? For sure, the Masters' pass mark is 50% rather than the undergraduate pass mark of 40%, but is that all there is to it, in terms of differentiating between the two awards? Is it legitimate (and possible) to therefore also try and define 'clear water' between the quality of work expected at Masters level, *in addition* to the bar being raised regarding the pass mark? Or, is it that the work submitted by undergraduates should have the same general criteria as Masters, reflecting the generic qualities which can be listed for all work at this level and beyond – namely, analytical skills, evaluative skills, ability to defend an argument, and so on? Of course, I am not suggesting that there are easy or uncontroversial answers to these questions – but, as the above guide is developed and honed, it might be worth considering these issues across the school as part of an on-going parallel debate concerning what is expected of an undergraduate and Masters student, and the similarities and differences between them.

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.

I note that you describe the standards achieved on our programmes as impressive and assess the teaching, marking and feedback delivered to students as being of high quality. Your comments on the structure and content of the programme, on the "rich and varied learning environment" and on our procedures for classification are much appreciated. You describe "the very strong emphasis on the enhanced development of ... independent/original thinking skills" on our MAs, and this is something we will be working hard to take forward as we revise and develop our provision. In that process we will want to maintain the synergy between POLIS research strengths and curriculum design that you single out as a particular strength of our programmes.

I am glad that you found that our administrative processes worked well and that the procedures of the exam board were transparent and consistent; you particularly praised as robust and effective the way in which the institution deals with plagiarism cases.

You 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.

You comment also on the POLIS postgraduate assessment guide which you describe as very useful. You raise the issue of the general marking criteria for MA as opposed to BA work and this is an issue which we will look at as we review that document. There are separate marking criteria at the postgraduate level as set out in the Code of Practice of Assessment Appendix 2.

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