

**The University of Leeds**  
**EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT**  
ACADEMIC YEAR: 2013– 2014

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

<i>Faculty / School of:</i>	School of Earth & Environment
<i>Subject(s):</i>	Environmental Management / Sustainable Development
<i>Programme(s) / Module(s):</i>	BA Environmental Management; BA Environment and Business; BA Environmental Sustainability; MEnv Environmental Management (International).
<i>Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):</i>	BA; MSc, MEnv

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

*Title and Name of Examiner:*

*Institution:*

*Address for communication:*

*Email:*

*Telephone:*

**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](mailto: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?*

This was my 4<sup>th</sup> (final) year

***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*

I have been most impressed with the quality of student work and staff dedication to teaching. I also feel the student support staff (School office staff and career development support) have been excellent and proactive. Through the four years standards have been high and remain high. The School continuously reviews the programmes and has made wise changes and innovations. Feedback from the School after receipt of my comments each year has been prompt and thorough. The programmes have been evolving in response to student demand and staff experience/appointment of new staff. The learning and teaching provision has progressed with IT provision in particular making considerable progress (VLR) as has the procedures for detecting and dealing with plagiarism.

I have been impressed by the way virtually all School academic and support staff are accessible to and very supportive of students and by the way employability issues are addressed.

This year (2014) there were exam support staff changes a little before my visit and this meant a steep learning curve for those asked to prepare material and handle the external examiner meetings. The staff concerned managed very well; however, there was slightly less smooth access to assessment and programme information than in previous years. I suggest that in future it may be good to involve externals more during the year, rather than just giving them sight of exam question preparation, sight of problem cases and access to assessment material during late-June. This would be especially beneficial if it were to include more sight of assessment material during the year. The School has forwarded written responses to my external examining comments, has updated me on new IT provision, arranged online access to the VLR and sent programme documents. More sight of assessment (essays/reports and exam scripts) throughout the year could give feedback to help improve marking, would be a useful preparation for the examiners and could enable them to make suggestions before irreversible decisions were made by the School.

I saw only 4 sets of exam scripts out of 18 modules this year, which is much less than in the past. It seems that unseen exams have been reduced in favour of other forms of assessment, which may not be a good move. I have been critical of exams of less than 2-hour duration for the last few years because I feel these do not give enough information to satisfactorily separate 2.1 and 1<sup>st</sup> candidates. I see short duration exams are still being used. I have argued that 2.1 candidates should show ability to analyse and 1<sup>st</sup> class candidates should be using material to argue in an objective and original manner; I am not convinced that this is always the case. Making markers look for those criteria would help maintain standards. I am aware that there are new programme developments and pleased to learn that sustainable development issues are one field making progress.

My 2012-13 concerns about modules provided by other Schools (Law, Business, Geography, etc.) remains. Such modules are valuable but here is a need for ongoing vigilance to ensure Earth & Environment students taking such modules: experience consistent marking standards; do not try to use tools for assessment work which they are not fully familiar with; are not disadvantaged when taught/assessed in different ways; can cover modules and ensure a fairly even loading over the academic year (i.e. not have too much in one semester due to timetable issues). These modules can be very valuable – e.g. some students have acquired tools like business plan construction, which could enhance career prospects and even improve grant application skills.

I view student feedback sessions as most important; however, for the first time this year there was a very poor student presence at our meeting although the School had tried hard to get a reasonable number to attend. No students from the programmes I examine and only 4 from other programmes were there. This has denied externals a key means of checking on a wide range of issues. My guess is that asking

students to attend in late-June is now unworkable because many seek internship and move on to training or temporary employment (Leeds has quite a late graduation compared with many institutions so there is a pressure for students to be away from the School when we visit). Possibly an earlier feedback session could be arranged using 'Skype' or one or two of the externals could be delegated to make a short visit well before June to gather feedback. As the National Student Survey is having growing impact it would make sense to have externals also monitor feedback.

Student Portfolios are useful for students in their evaluation of their learning and provide externals with information. Unfortunately, the portfolios are not being maintained well enough. A fair number were missing this year (not submitted by the students) and some had been poorly updated by the students. I gather there are difficulties getting students to manage and submit the portfolios and that the process may be altered or discontinued in the future. Possibly one issue is that submission of portfolios has been timed close to some assessment deadline or exams and a change of schedule that might be a key to improving things.

## 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.*

During 2014 I read through the module programmes/outlines, the School Handbook for Undergraduates and other relevant documents and I feel the learning outcomes are appropriate and are generally achieved. The structures of the programmes appear to be good and there is ongoing positive development. Due to limited student feedback this year I was not able to fully check whether there were any issues with pathways, nor obtain student views on the learning process. Nevertheless standards are high. I do however feel there is a need to check how pathways are affecting student's choices of year 2 and 3 modules.

I looked at a large sample of dissertation work (SOEE3030) and the top-end candidates were most impressive. A number of the SOEE3310 assessments were outstanding and original pieces. This module should help develop judgement, practical and interpersonal skills and confidence and may well help student employability. There were however some problems apparent this year: I checked some dissertations with another external, selecting a number of candidates who had just made the 1<sup>st</sup> class or who were proposed for prizes and checking before we knew internal grades or comments. We felt after our check that some candidates had very high dissertation marks from both internal markers, yet our view was that the student work was not objective in approach and made limited or clumsy attempt at analysis. Possibly assessment marking criteria need to be reviewed to address this. I would urge the School to seek to ensure assessment work in year 3 (dissertations and projects) pose and address a clear question and do it in an analytical and objective way and not simply discuss an issue. Some candidates might otherwise be tempted to produce fluent and interesting but subjective and non-analytical work, which should not get very high grades. This would help ensure that there is not a 'creep' toward more and more 1<sup>st</sup> and 2.1 assessment grades. I suggest the dissertation handbook (and perhaps other assessment handbooks) make these points clear to candidates at the outset of their module.

I felt there were noticeably more candidates claiming extenuation (for a range of reasons) in 2014.

### 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.*

Some of the School modules are interdisciplinary so it is difficult to relate the programmes to a specific subject benchmark. I have examined a range of environmental management and sustainability programmes elsewhere and I feel the standards compare very favourably with the

best standards in the UK and place Leeds in a very sound position. There are some very good candidates.

**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.*

The School uses a good mix of unseen exams, assessments (dissertation, project report, fieldwork reports, CV/job application; oral exams, group assessments) that in general works well (although I have some concern about group assessments). Group assessment must be well managed to ensure all in a group have similar workloads and gain to the same degree in learning. I have made the point that short (1 hour) exams may not stretch top students enough. Feedback is crucial and I am aware the School aims for a 3-week turnaround. I had wanted to check on this with student reps but there were none; profiles hinted that there might be some modules, which do not manage a prompt delivery of feedback.

I saw only 4 sets of unseen exam scripts this year and feel it would be a good idea to raise the amount of exam-type assessment. I would urge that in year 3 these be papers of 2 hours or more duration so that good candidates stand-out (making the decision to award a 2.1 or 1<sup>st</sup> easier and more secure).

Comments on the feedback sheets/on the text - for assessed work were more than adequate. However, one set of exam scripts had no comments whatsoever, making it impossible to track and judge the marking process. Also, the examinations Office seem to be failing to include the question paper with scripts. Externals need to be able to see the questions set when checking scripts because they had sight months earlier. One exam script internal marker made use of 69 and 59 a lot. Such marks tend to get rounded up and seem indecisive - it would make sense to indicate a high point in a class by 58 or 68 to reduce that drift.

The marking guidance might be improved, felt last year and still feel, that with some of the check sheets a large range of issues were covered, yet two key qualities were understated: 1) analysis/analytical skill; 2) originality/excellence.

I am happy with the use of a 3<sup>rd</sup> marker where internal markers differ by >10%. I saw adequate citation of sources in assessment and exam scripts with evidence the reading is understood and used - so I am happy that candidates are reading enough material in sufficient depth and can apply it.

**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 students had good opportunity to demonstrate their achievements. The top students were impressive. The standards are very good and compare well with other similar modules in other top UK universities. The School teaching/support system appears to work well and the student and staff enjoy stimulating and happy environment.

I again have to say that looking at assessment (projects/reports/ especially dissertations) that in some cases statistical skills were in limited evidence. I deal mainly with BA, nevertheless, most (not only the top candidates) should be able to use packages like SPSS and apply stats. I am aware

many can use Excel and that there is a first year module in maths for social scientists. Too much of the data collection in dissertations was crude or almost lacking. There seems to be a need for BA students to have more social statistics (questionnaire, sampling, focus groups, etc.). Noticeable were the crude attempts at semi-structured surveys with poor sampling procedures undertaken by some dissertation candidates.

**5. For Examiners responsible for programmes that include clinical practice components, please comment on the learning and assessment of practice components of the curriculum**

Not Applicable

**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.*

My 2013 comments were considered and I had a clear feedback on them. My impression is that the students are well cared for and that teaching and administrative staff in the School are really quite proactive and perceptive and pick up on problems very well. There is clearly a problem with student portfolios. I understand that programmes are being updated and will have improved sustainable development and environmental management components and I have met the new staff involved – these developments look most promising and again indicate the School is being proactive and adaptive.

**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.*

I feel that the School staff are very active and weave their interest and enthusiasm into teaching. Staff appear to take non-research duties seriously and seem to network for their students to assist project choices and find placements and to deliver fieldwork. I think modules are informed and updated by research and there is good contact with business/industry which also enhances teaching considerably. The staff clearly impart enthusiasm to students.

Some student project work is original and outstanding.

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

Not Applicable

**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**

Nothing formal. There are plenty of opportunities during the June external visit for the group of externals to exchange information and one was new this year. I would be happy to support an incoming new external if asked to do so. I do feel that just viewing material (other than checking exam questions and dealing with late submissions and problem cases) in June does not give the externals close enough involvement and that it would be a good move to send them more assessment work during the year to allow them to judge internal marking and offer feedback while it can still be made use of.

## 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.*

I have had quite detailed guidelines and updated papers each year. The School contacted me during the year with a detailed response to my 2013 Report. This year we have had guidance and passwords to access things like the School Programme Catalogue and the VLR system. If I need additional information I have only to ask and the School provides it. I have had the SurveyMonkey student feedback statistics for all the modules. Adequate student feedback sessions were not possible this year and that is an important problem.

### 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.*

In general all was good. However, I have the feeling that there should be more involvement with marking and assessment during the year. This does not mean I seek to see all scripts as the year progresses; however, it would improve examiners oversight and tighten marking if there were more involvement before June.

### 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, I had sight of all draft exam papers and the model answers for all modules in the School and had the opportunity to suggest amendments/ask questions. My comments were acted upon. All is most satisfactory.

### 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?

The School made exam scripts, assessment and student portfolios available during the June visit. I have commented earlier on my feeling that group assessment and short duration exams are not ideal and that in some cases marking guidelines/feedback sheets might be improved. I also argue that it might help distinguish the 2.1 boundary and the 1<sup>st</sup> boundary if more stress were placed on analytical skill (for 2.1 and above) and originality/excellence (for 1<sup>st</sup>). I commented earlier on some poor exam script annotation – there should be a summary of a few lines for each question so I can see how the mark is arrived at.

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

Some of the dissertations were impressive. As mentioned earlier, I made a check of some high mark dissertations which, although very fluent and clearly the work of enthusiastic students, struck me (and another examiner) as lacking in objectivity and an analytical approach. So, while topics may be most interesting and often original there is a need to ensure the work is not just fluent narrative (even politicised in approach) and really is testing things in a rational way or *using* literature to argue a reasoned case.

**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?**

Administrative arrangements were very good. I attended the Board. I am happy with the way the Board was conducted and with the recommendations. The grades 2.2, 3 and fail seem to be markedly in decline, which I hope reflects improving standards and not an upward 'grade creep'.

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

I think such issues were dealt with well. I noted an apparent marked increase of such cases and assume the numbers making mitigation claims are increasing (which will increase staff workload).

**Other comments**

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

This is my fourth year with Leeds and my 27<sup>th</sup> year as an external in various universities – I am happy to answer any further questions if asked.

**School of Earth and Environment**

University of Leeds  
Leeds LS2 9JT



**UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS**

24 October 2014

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

**RE: Response to External Examiner's Report (BA Environment & Business/  
BSc Sustainability and Environmental Management), 2013/14**

We thank you for this report, and for the four years you have contributed to external examining. We are glad to hear that you are satisfied with our degrees, particularly regarding academic standards, employability, and the dedication and enthusiasm of academic and support staff, and we are delighted with your comments that the degrees are improving in quality.

I am disappointed that you did not have access this year to the level of programme and assessment information that you have previously been used to. We are convening a group at Faculty level to investigate how to improve access to assessment information for External Examiners, including how best to arrange access at different times of the year. We are encouraging staff in SOEE to allow more submissions by e-copy only, and have asked all staff to keep electronic copies of any feedback provided. This will ensure that more work is available for inspection and is easier to access than through the Portfolios. Ensuring access to work submitted in hard-copy only may be more problematic; this is also being considered.

I have asked \_\_\_\_\_ to provide the new external examiners for both the BSc and BA Environment programmes with a selection of the scripts from the Semester 1 examinations to be made available for inspection in February.

With regards to increasing the number of final year students to meet with our external examiners, the Taught Student Office will look to see if students can meet with externals earlier in the academic year, rather than waiting until the week of Exam Boards in June. Pin pointing an appropriate time during the academic year will also guarantee that students are still at university.

**Assessment:**

We note your concerns about students taking short exams in their final years. We have been reducing the number of short exams across the degrees at all levels. As of this academic year, there is only one final year module (an optional module for the Sustainability and Environmental Management student) which has an exam of less than two hours, and this counts for only a part of the overall module mark. We agree that exams in the final year are an excellent opportunity to distinguish excellent students from very good students. To this end, this year we are introducing a new module, compulsory for Sustainability and Environmental Management students, optional for Environment and Business students, which contains a 3 hour exam, and which seeks to



assess synoptically students' abilities to link together ideas from across the three years of their degree. It is specifically aimed at allowing the best students to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the material across the depth and breadth of their degree.

We share your concern that students taking modules in other schools need to be aware of different marking and assessment criteria. We also share your belief that taking modules in other schools can be highly beneficial, and we intend to continue offering such opportunities to our students. To address this issue, we will be emphasising to our students at the start of each academic year that they should be aware of different assessment practices criteria in other schools, and that they should seek clarification and guidance from the module leader and the student support office in these other schools. With regards to uneven loading across semesters, we are keen to ensure that where possible students take an even number of credits across the two semesters. Where this is not possible, the loading never exceeds 70 credits per semester (out of a total of 120 credits taken in each academic year), and students are reminded that they should be aware of such unequal loading and manage workload accordingly.

We note that portfolios, whilst a good idea to enhance the external examination process, often are not being sufficiently maintained and there was little evidence across the school of students referring to the collated feedback therein. Moreover, the need to moderate work before it was returned often contributed to delays in receipt of feedback. We are now completing the phasing out of the portfolio system. In future, students will submit assessments electronically where possible, and both the assessed work and feedback summaries will be available to external examiners.

#### **Academic Standards:**

We welcome your positive comments on the quality of our students and our teaching, and the opportunities given to students to demonstrate their abilities. In particular, we are pleased with your assessment that our degrees compare very favourably with the best standards in the UK.

We welcome your assessment of the outstanding nature of our best dissertation students. With regards the overall quality, we plan to discuss this more widely with staff at school level to ensure consistency and quality across markers. Moreover, the Undergraduate Sub-Committee is coordinating a review of good dissertation module practice, including norms for supervision and marking.

One of the challenges we face in the school is that our research and teaching is highly interdisciplinary, and this is reflected in our dissertations, which range from highly quantitative, such as computer simulations of weather systems, to the highly qualitative, such as oral history research of community groups. We aim to ensure that no matter what the methodological approach or disciplinary background, there is consistent marking across the school. With regards standards of analysis, the marking criteria notes that for marks of 80 or more, there is "Extremely good understanding of significance of data analysis... analysis is critical and rigorous leading to important and original conclusions", that for marks of 70-79, dissertations should contain "Very good understanding of significance of data analysis... Analysis is rigorous leading to substantial conclusions", and that dissertations of 60-69, "Interpretation, analysis and discussion exhibit satisfactory higher-level cognitive skills". We are confident that our students are increasing in quality, as part reflecting the changes in our admissions criteria, which we feel should increase the quality of our dissertations.

We note your observation that our students have ample opportunity to demonstrate their abilities. With regards their handing of methods and statistics, we have revised our core research methods modules, and so our future graduates will be stronger in quantitative methodology. These changes were introduced in academic year 2013-14, particularly focusing on the second year methods module, and this should be reflected in the dissertations of the final

year students in academic year 2014-15. You note that all students, and not just a few, should be able to use packages such as SPSS. We are now using SPSS to teach qualitative methods in first and second year. Finally, from this academic year, students entering the BSc Sustainability and Environmental Management and BA Environment and Business degrees without AS level maths (or equivalent) must pass a maths module to progress to third year.

Thank you once again for your supportive comments that have been invaluable in helping shape the further improvement of our courses.

Yours sincerely,



**Professor Robert Mortimer**

Head of School  
School of Earth and Environment  
University of Leeds  
Leeds  
LS2 9JT  
Tel: +44 (0) 113 34 35251 (Direct Line)  
Email: [r.j.g.mortimer@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:r.j.g.mortimer@leeds.ac.uk)