

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

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

School of: Earth and Environment Programme(s) / Module(s): SOEE5010M: Research Methods SOEE5020M: Research Project SOEE5051M: Business, Environment & Sustainability SOEE5091M: Introduction to Ecological Economics SOEE5281M: Introduction to Sustainability SOEE5350M: Qualitative Research Methods SOEE5471M: Environmental Governance & Sustainability SOEE5483M: Critical Perspectives in Environment & Development SOEE5495M: Env.-Dev. Overseas Field Course SOEE5490M: Env. Research Phil. & Design SOEE5540M: CC: Physical Science Basis SOEE5550M: CC: Impacts and Adaptation SOEE5561M: Climate Change Mitigation	Subject(s): Sustainability (Environment and Development) Sustainability (Environmental Politics and Policy) Sustainability (Climate Change) MREs Sustainability Research awards: (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc.)
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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.

I think it would be worthwhile, when setting the exam for *SOEE5550M: Climate Change: Impacts and Adaptation*, to consider what it would be reasonable for students with a social science background to have learnt on the physical science side. This is an impressive, challenging module (see my course –specific comments below), but is there sufficient teaching time (lectures and seminars) to equip students to the level where they can do well on Part A of the course? In other words, do the assessment expectations for Part A match student experience?

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.

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.*

For the programmes and modules examined, I found the intended learning outcomes (ILOs) commensurate with Masters level teaching and assessment. Across the modules, there was evidence of a high level of teaching design and delivery tailored both to course-specific ILOs and programme-based outcomes. The Moderated Mark Forms and minutes of examinations meetings indicate a careful, reasoned application of academic standards.

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.*

As noted in my report last year, there is no national subject benchmark for Masters-level environmental courses. However, I am confident that the programmes compare favourably with other Masters programmes in environmental and sustainability studies. The Sustainability MSc programmes have a strong blend of theoretical and substantive content, with links where possible to staff research; for example, I saw impressive examples of the discussion of staff research findings with students and opportunities for students to take part in staff research projects. The ambitious interdisciplinarity of the Leeds Sustainability programmes is also commendable.

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.*

There are a variety of assessment methods across the Sustainability MSc programmes, which are generally clearly described in module handbooks, with accompanying marking criteria. Alongside traditional assessment methods, I noted innovative assignments which students seemed to respond well to – e.g. the use of VLE postings and discussion in SOE5051M and the field course diaries in SOEE5495M. One course (SOEE5281M) featured five students investigated for plagiarism and, after receiving further information on this during my visit to Leeds, I was satisfied that the processes for dealing with this case, and for plagiarism generally, are fair and effective.

Overall, the marking process is transparent and robust, with meaningful mark moderation. I was pleased to see use of a wide range of marks, which indicates that students are being assessed appropriately, and those that work hard seem justly to be rewarded. Student feedback on teaching is positive across the courses, notably on the enthusiasm of teaching staff.

However, I do have two assessment-related concerns:

- I noted in several instances in research project marking (SOEE5020M) where students received Distinction level marks but had very brief methodological discussions: interestingly, two of these featured large differences between the two internal markers (which were both resolved effectively through moderation). There are mark descriptors for the research projects indicating that 20% of marks will be allocated for methodology/research design. On discussion with staff, it seems there are different views on what this means in practice – i.e. whether this refers only to the methodology section of the dissertation or to more general evidence of successful application of a research methodology (even if an explicit methodological rationale is lacking). My view is that a research project should include an explicit methodological rationale and that this should be high quality in a Distinction-level dissertation. **My general recommendation is that some staff discussion would be worthwhile on finding ways to be more consistent in marking the methodological contribution of research projects: further clarity here would also assist students, and could involve amending or elaborating the current mark descriptor on the 20% of marks allocated for methodology.**
- At least two courses (SOEE5550M and SOEE5561M) that I looked at allow students to pick their own essay titles, which are presumably approved by the course manager or relevant lecturer. **I did not see any sign of safeguards here to prevent students proposing titles which may overlap with assessments in other courses or to ensure parity of assessment treatment** (can a student propose an 'easy' title?). Of course, such procedures may already be in place, so I would welcome confirmation of this.

Feedback to students is thorough, clear and constructive: the practice of providing generic exam feedback to students is to be applauded. The classification meeting was conducted professionally, including a very useful discussion of discretion in deciding awards, which resulted in a justifiable reclassification for at least one student.

This discussion, which related to another programme, invited the School to consider whether it has enough discretionary scope in its classification meetings.

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.*

I did not receive information to compare student performance to previous cohorts: such aggregate information (even brief programme-level averages) would be useful to provide to external examiners. However, from looking at student mark profiles and attending the Final Classifications Meeting, I am satisfied that students have adequate opportunity to demonstrate generic and module-specific skills and knowledge. There were some excellent mark profiles. Students' 2010-11 performance is generally similar to students on comparable courses in my own institution <<<>>>.

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

I noted above (point 3) some innovations in assessments practice. In addition, the new *Environment and Development Overseas Field Course* (SOEE5495M) seems to have been particularly successful, with a high average mark and examples of impressive work (though I didn't see student feedback data). This is an ambitious undertaking, which I'm sure took considerable staff time to organise and run; however, it directly drew on staff-related research and exposed students to the great benefits of experiential learning. I hope it continues.

The use of linked but diverse assessment methods can promote student progression *within* a course. This was evident across a number of courses, but the benefits were particularly apparent in *Introduction to Sustainability* (SOEE5281M), which used an essay, policy brief and take-home exam to build up student knowledge and skills. Looking at student marks, it seems that improving performances as the course progressed demonstrate the reinforcement of learning outcomes through different assessment challenges.

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.

As with last year, there was significant evidence of teaching reflecting current staff research: I think this is a real strength of the Leeds MSc Sustainability Programmes. This included: the involvement of students in staff research projects in SOE5020M, student discussion of staff preliminary research findings (SOEE5471M) and student exposure to staff research themes (e.g. SOEE5483M, SOEE5495M, SOEE5550M).

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 School administrative staff were again very helpful.

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.

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

Yes.

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, though these were reported on rather than discussed at the Final Classifications Meeting as they had been considered at a previous examinations meeting.

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.

Comments of specific modules

SOEE5010M: Research Methods

- Clear marking criteria and good use of marking range
- There seems to be an issue about English language support for written work: are relevant students picked up by early formative essays (whether in this or other courses).

SOEE5020M: Research Project

- A good performance from students (64.5% mean)
- Some students clearly benefit from participation in staff research projects: is this reflected in marking? And is there equality of opportunity to allow all interested students to do this?
- See my comments above (section 3) on the assessment of students' methodological contributions.

SOEE5051M: Business, Environment & Sustainability

- High student satisfaction with the module, though weaker students struggled
- The innovative VLE assessment deserves credit

SOEE5091M: Introduction to Ecological Economics

[see comments by <<<>>]

SOEE5281M: Introduction to Sustainability

- High student satisfaction with teaching
- The Policy Brief assignment worked very well with excellent student marks

SOEE5350M: Qualitative Research Methods

- Credit due for highlighting research ethics and its relationship to techniques
- Can the long reading list be made more manageable for students?

SOEE5471M: Environmental Governance & Sustainability

- The seminar on community-driven accountability in Ghana and Uganda successfully demonstrated how staff research can be used to engage students
- Very positive student feedback on the teaching
- Credit for detailed written feedback to students

SOEE5483M: Critical Perspectives in Environment & Development

- An excellent module handbook with very clear guidance and comprehensive course information
- Evidence of through marking moderation
- Very positive student feedback on the intellectual content and enthusiasm of teaching staff
- Credit for detailed written feedback to students

SOEE5495M: Env.-Dev. Overseas Field Course

- A commendable programme innovation (see section 6 above)
- Credit for detailed written feedback to students
- Student feedback?

SOEE5490M: Env. Research Phil. & Design

- Credit for detailed written feedback on assignments
- There was a copy of one poster but not from the other student
- Student feedback?

SOEE5540M: Climate Change: Physical Science Basis

[see comments by <<<>>]

SOEE5550M: Climate Change: Impacts and Adaptation

- Excellent module handbook
- Very positive student feedback on the teaching
- Essays apparently not submitted for moderation: were they eventually looked at?
- Review of module assessment advised: See comments above: *Part B : Matters for Urgent Attention*

SOEE5561M: Climate Change Mitigation

- Very good student performance overall (67% mean and 9 distinctions)
- Excellent student presentation marks, but no evidence of this: presentation feedback forms?
- Both essays are 3,000 words but with different assessment weighting: why not make them both 45%?



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Professor Andrew Dougill
Head of School of Earth and Environment
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11 January 2012

Dear

Re: Response to External Examiner's Report - MSc Sustainability (Environment and Development); MSc Sustainability (Environmental Politics and Policy); MRes Sustainability; 2010-11

Thank you for examining our MSc/MRes programmes for the last academic session, and for your thoughtful and constructive comments. Your views are an essential part of our quality assurance mechanism and we welcome your input into our teaching processes.

We appreciate your hard work and positive comments about the overall effectiveness and quality of the MSc/MRes programmes. We are pleased that our programmes were found in general to be well designed and well delivered. In particular we value your recognition of the MSc/MRes programmes' "ambitious interdisciplinarity", wide range of assessment methods, fair and effective process for dealing with plagiarism cases, and use of clear and constructive student feedback. We note your request and aim to make available in the future aggregate information to compare student performance to previous cohorts.

On matters for urgent attention, you highlighted concern about whether the assessment expectations for Part A of the *SOEE550M: Climate Change: Impacts and Adaptation* exam match student experience. The module manager agrees that there is an issue with how well prepared students are for the questions of that section of the exam, and noted that students rarely take him up on his offer to review student answers to past exam papers. However, in the current academic year the module manager will devote more teaching time to develop the students' understanding of, and response to, exam questions.

On other assessment-related concerns, we agree that more clarity could be given to both students and markers related to the methodological contribution of research projects (i.e. *SOEE5020M*). More clear guidelines will be drafted in consultation with supervisors so a final version can be disseminated to supervisors and new students for this year's dissertations. The programme leaders will discuss this in due course. With regards to allowing students to pick their own essay titles (i.e. *SOEE550M* and *SOEE5561M*), you noted that there were not any signs of safeguards to prevent students proposing titles similar to assessments in other courses or to ensure similarity of assessment treatment. The module manager for *SOEE5561M* has confirmed that there are safeguards in place. For example, one of the essays they have to select is from a list of six possible essay titles and the students cannot deviate from this. For the other essay, the topic has been assigned to them; however they can request to change to one of four other topics. The module manager for *SOEE5092M* who is also

responsible for the essays in SOEE550M has confirmed that all assignments are subjected to plagiarism and self-plagiarism scrutiny, so papers have to be distinct from other work submitted to other modules. This is being done by increasing use of Turnitin for coursework. With regards to the adequacy of essay titles, the module manager confirmed that extensive general guidance is given in class, and the formulation of feasible problems to be addressed in a paper is one key aspect that is tested in the assignments.

With regards to module specific responses:

SOEE5010M: With regards to English language support for written work, the SOEE5281M first essay helps to identify a number of issues, including language, and students for whom English is not a first language have a compulsory English language test in the first week of term and those with under a certain level are required to attend language classes.

SOEE5020M: We agree that students benefit from participation in staff projects. It is unclear how this is reflected in marking. Although eight out of the eleven distinctions were awarded to students participating in staff projects, it is likely that the more proficient students engage with staff more proactively. We will highlight the concern to staff that all interested students should have an equal opportunity to participate in staff projects.

SOEE5051M: We are pleased you recognise the innovative use of VLE assessment.

SOEE5281M: We are pleased that you agree that the Policy Brief assignment worked very well.

SOEE5350M: With regards to the comprehensive reading list, although it is long, students are guided towards key references during each lecture to help provide more of a focus and to draw their attention to key publications.

SOEE5471M: We are pleased that you recognise the use of staff research to engage students, as well as the quality of feedback to students.

SOEE5483M: We are pleased you note the very clear guidance of the module handbook and comprehensive course information, as well as the quality of feedback to students.

SOEE5495M: We appreciate your recognition of the programme innovation, and although module feedback was collected, we will ensure that you receive it next year.

SOEE5490M: We will endeavour to make sure you receive all of the coursework from students in the future and will remind staff to ensure all feedback forms are captured and returned to the postgraduate administrator in a timely manner.

SOEE5550M: We are pleased that you recognise the quality of the module handbook and will ensure that all essays are properly submitted for moderation in the future. The comments on module assessment are discussed above.

SOEE5561M: Students will receive formal feedback through the use of a feedback form for the presentation, and this form will be available on the VLE before the presentation to allow the students to see the criteria for assessment. The marking criteria will be kept the same where essay 2 is worth 50% and essay 1 is worth 40%. This is because essay 1 is the same topic as the group presentation, which is worth 10%.

Finally, we are pleased to note that the report highlights positive student feedback on teaching across the courses and strong integration of research-led teaching. We are grateful for your encouragement and helpful suggestions.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Andrew Dougill
Head of School of Earth and Environment