

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:	School of Earth & Environment
Subject(s):	<i>Engineering Geology</i>
Programme(s) / Module(s):	Entire MSc programme
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	MSc

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?

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

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 of study reaches that required of a Masters level course. There is a good balance of theoretical and more practical Units that one would expect on a Masters of this nature.

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.*

This Masters level course is one of four currently being offered in the UK. I am sure that this course compares well with the others being currently offered in the UK and internationally.

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 is a blended form of both lectures and assessment which ensures that all student needs are met. The assessment marking and feedback is appropriate for this level of course. However, the student feedback (both at Unit level and verbally to me) suggests that although the quality of feedback is good it is often late and therefore does not allow it to be used in a formative mode. I note that this was also a comment in the last Examiners report. I have discussed this with the staff and they assure me that this is being addressed. Students also complain of assessment bunching towards the end of Semester 2 – although inevitable to some extent I have discussed ways of changing this with the course leader and hope to see improvements next year.

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 stated above there is a blended learning approach to this course which ensures students are able to demonstrate their strengths and build on their weaknesses. The coursework content is particularly well liked and does apply theory to practice. The students do least well in the Soil Mechanics Unit which is consistent with other Masters courses and not a surprise. The projects are generally of a high standard. There is however a feeling that preparation for the projects is left too late in the year (May) leaving only three months for completion. I have discussed this with the course team and have agreed a way forward.

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

NA

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.

Feedback is still a problem with no real improvement from last year in terms of timing but there has been an improvement in the quality of feedback. Timing issues could be related to the high student numbers (>30) this year and a relatively small core team. Numbers for the next cohort are also in the 30's and therefore staffing may well be an issue going forward especially as the MSc in Engineering Geology at Imperial College will close next year. The process of project allocation was also raised last year by the External Examiner (see above). This aspect does not appear to have been adequately resolved from last year as the students feedback is almost identical on this issue.

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.

Aspects of research are contained in the curriculum and are evident in the projects with a large number being research focussed. Whilst the increase in the role of research in the programme is definitely applauded, a clear emphasis must remain on the application of theory and research to practice as this is primarily a course which leads into employment in the ground engineering sector.

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

NA

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

I did receive mentoring in the form of visiting the project presentations with the previous External Examiner – this was a great help and worked well for me.

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.

Yes but I had to ask for some of these.

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 – these were all sent in a timely fashion

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 exam scripts, coursework and projects were available

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 standard of marking and feedback was very good.

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

Yes, I have looked at a selection of projects covering the range of marks. The projects have been marked appropriately although I think some of the +70% grades could have been in the 80%. I would encourage the team to give the excellent feedback on these projects back to the students as this is the final major piece of work but they receive no formal feedback

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?

Yes

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

Yes

Other comments

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

I have attached my notes to verbal feedback for the student cohort gathered on 31st July 2013 during the project presentations conference.

External examiners report on verbal feedback: MSc Engineering Geology 31 July 2014

This short report is a summary of verbal feedback to me (the external examiner) for the University of Leeds MSc Engineering Geology 2013-14 cohort. The feedback was gathered during my attendance at the final year project presentations made by the students on 31st July and 1st August 2014. Summary of comments are as follows:

1. General

There was strong feeling that the course was appropriately demanding, academically stimulating and delivered by staff that were experts in their fields. This positive aspect however has been let down by a perceived lack of organisation, poor communication and delivery of lectures which appear not to be aligned with other Units (not joined-up).

Coursework descriptors and marking criteria appear to be problematic in that they either, do not exist for some coursework; are far too vague or; are issued too late to be of use. This does not apply to all coursework but this message came across quite clearly.

There was unanimous praise for [redacted] for the contribution [redacted] has made to the teaching of the course this year.

2. Assessment Bunching

Bunching of assessments is a major issue with most of the course work submission dates being at the end of semester 2 followed by the exam period in May. This was exasperated by late instructions on what was required or expected, vague instruction/guidance, mixed messages from different members of the academic team.

To alleviate this bunching the students suggested that: some exams should be set if possible in January to remove some pressure; coursework descriptors and marking schemes need to be issued as early as possible so that work can be properly managed and; bring forward some of the coursework (cavern design project for instance).

3. Projects

The management of the final dissertation project was also highlighted as being a problem. I was surprised to find out that there is no Project Handbook with marking schedule, format requirements etc... available for this major piece of work (students appeared not to know the word limit or had been given conflicting information).

Students felt disadvantaged by not being given project titles until the Cyprus field trip. This is compounded by the fact that due to late of assessments they have no real feeling of where their strengths may lie. I floated the idea of being assigned a project supervisor/academic tutor early in semester 2 in order to develop project ideas – this received a positive response.

Some students felt disadvantaged in that their assigned projects had either fallen through or they were still awaiting data from industry (this

External examiners report on verbal feedback: MSc Engineering Geology 31 July 2014

was clearly evident in some of the student presentations). This problem may be alleviated by earlier project formulation with supervisor as suggested above.

4. Feedback

Although it was felt that feedback was generally good and constructive but was often returned beyond the suggested 3 weeks turnaround period set by the University.

Some academic staff only gave generic course work feedback giving the excuse that there were too many students on the course to give individual comments. The cohort felt that if this is the case then the numbers on the MSc should be capped to ensure proper feedback could be given.

5. Fieldwork

Fieldtrips to UK construction sites and mines were cancelled with the excuse given that the cohort was too large. Response to this is as above. Most of the cohort really enjoyed the Cyprus field trip and all appreciated the effort that was made in organising some excellent construction site visits during the trip.

External Examiner
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**UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS**

01 December 2014

Dear

RE: Response to External Examiner's Report, MSc Engineering Geology 2013/14

First of all I would like to thank you again for spending time with our students. Collecting feedback interactively with the cohort is a vastly superior method of obtaining the necessary information by comparison to written surveys. Secondly, I would like to address the issues raised in your report.

It was gratifying to hear that the Masters in Engineering Geology compares well with similar courses offered in the UK and internationally, that the assessment and marking is appropriate for this level 5 programme, and that the coursework component was in general well-received by the students, feedback and marking standards were good, that you perceive a strong research-into-teaching theme within the dissertation project work, and that the students found that the programme was academically stimulating. Nevertheless, you raise a number of aspects for improvement; I aim to deal with these in detail below.

1. You note that although the quality of feedback was improved on previous years, it was often late which limits use in formative mode.

Feedback has been an ongoing issue for us and in 2013/14 was worsened by the fact that one key member of the programme delivery team resigned in July 2013 and was not replaced until February 2014, thus overloading the other members of the team. Nevertheless, the issue had been raised in previous years, so to address this we are encouraging teaching staff to be more focused on their feedback and/or to use alternative methods (e.g. use of methods aimed at providing rapid feedback on generic issues across the cohort) and to ensure that students are able to use this in formative mode (but not as a substitute for individual feedback).

2. You note that students complained of assessment bunching towards the end of semester 2.

While it is true that this is to some extent inevitable given the short nature of the taught programme (2 terms), nevertheless there were exceptional personal circumstances last year that contributed to greater than usual bunching, which should not recur in future years. Also, this year the large (9 credit) coursework element of the Soils Engineering assessment has been adjusted to include a number of smaller units with formative assessment, due in prior to the main summative assessment deadline (which has also been brought forwards).

3. You note that students felt that preparation for dissertation projects and distribution / allocation of project occurs too late in the Year (May), leaving only three months for completion.

There were 15 weeks available for completion of projects, between mid-May and end-August which is the correct amount of time for their credit weighting according to the University norms (60 credits = 600 hrs work which is 15 x 40hr weeks). However, we appreciate that an earlier consideration of projects may assist in students' preparedness to undertake this work element, so in the coming academic year we aim to i) discuss potential project types with students in personal tutorials and ii) produce the list of available projects somewhat earlier, e.g. by the end of term 2 (mid-March). With respect to dissertation preparation, the programme team will consider best practice elsewhere in the school with respect to production of dissertation module handbooks, feedback from the marking process and early allocation of supervisors to support project development.

4. You note that verbal comments from the students to yourself in a meeting at the end of July highlighted the following points (as well as the issues identified above):

a) coursework descriptors/marketing criteria do not exist for all coursework, are too vague, or issued too late to be of use (e.g. dissertation marking criteria).

It is University policy that all coursework marking criteria should be published in advance, or at least at the time the coursework is set. Our new Graduate Teaching Assistant position gives us additional capacity to ensure compliance in this regard.

The suggestion that marking criteria are vague may reflect a failure by students to recognise the high-level of independence that is a requirement of M-level work. This makes it inappropriate to over-specify the desired outcomes. However, the School's exams officer is launching a project to provide more guidance on assessment criteria.

b) Suggestion from students that semester 1 material should be examined in January.

The issue here is one of available time –the first two weeks of term 2 are used for teaching – so undertaking exams here would reduce the time available for teaching. An alternative would be to use a larger component of assessed work (rather than exams) for term 1 material; we will consider this at the forthcoming Industry Advisory Board / Programme Delivery Team meeting.

c) Issue of dissertation projects falling through or data being received late from industry partners.

We aim to produce the dissertation project list earlier for the current academic year. Nevertheless this is unlikely to solve the problem of some dissertation projects falling through or data being received late. In many cases this reflects non pro-active approach by students (e.g. one student failed to inform the supervisor, so he was unaware that the data had not been provided by the partner organisation until July). In inevitable cases where delays occurs through no fault of the student, our approach is to offer an extension to the project deadline; current timing of examinations meetings in October means that marking of such delayed dissertations is still possible within the normal timeframe.

d) Fieldtrips being cancelled because the cohort was too large

In fact no fieldtrips were cancelled: the comment may reflect a misconception that site visits would be provided throughout the teaching period; we now clarify the number of site visits/fieldtrips at our Open Days and Induction. In fact we introduced a new semester 2 fieldtrip last year which was very well received by the students and represented an increase in the number and variety of field training days provided.

Once again, I would like to thank you for the time you have spent with our MSc students and staff; we look forward to your continuing input to our programme in the New Year.

Yours sincerely,

Head of School
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