

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):

awards: MSc

Geochemistry, and
Environmental Geochemistry

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, and I was satisfied with the School's responses

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.*

The ILOs are set at the correct, challenging level for a Masters degree.

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.*

These Masters courses have a reputation for being the brand leaders in the UK, providing a first class, research-orientated and research-enriched training programme in geochemistry. The reputation is well deserved in my opinion. Expectations are set at a challenging level to which the students rise, and the calibre of the graduating students is very high. The general standards and academic expectations are consistent with other Russell Group universities at which I have either worked or examined.

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 methods of assessment vary across the units being offered, and include lab notebooks, numerical calculations, critical essays, presentations, independent research projects and unseen examinations. They are appropriate for the ILOs. The arrangements for marking and moderation are appropriate and consistent. The classification of awards is consistent with University of Leeds regulations.

The quality of the teaching is very high in my estimation, and there is a high standard of student care and support. Feedback to the students is clear and consistent with the both expectation of student performance and mark awarded.

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 was very impressed with the student presentations of their research projects. The presentations clearly demonstrated an enthusiasm for the subject, an impressive critical understanding of the literature and the benefits of interacting with research-active staff who also take their teaching duties very seriously. The written work showed an academic maturity, which grew as the course progressed. I rate the attainment of the students as above average.

The students graduate with a good range of laboratory, quantitative and academic skills that should stand them well for future employment in geochemistry, both in the private and public sectors. The students constituted an able, educated and enthusiastic cohort.

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.

There is no need for major revision of the course, since there is an expectation of year on year improvements, in line with feedback from students and external examiners

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.

This is clear to see in the choice of dissertations, which are mostly on challenging topics in the research remit of the staff. Most of the units have research-elements which evolve along with staff interests. There is a culture of research-enhancement of the Masters units amongst the staff. This is not a programme that stands still or rests on its laurels.

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.*

I was very well supported by the Administrative staff, the Course Director and by course providers. No information was denied to me, and I was able to easily track and trace how decisions on marks and degree classifications were reached.

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.*

These were all delivered to me well ahead of time. I do question whether your practice of not allowing Externals to adjust marks is sensible, and your use of mark scaling is, frankly, beyond comprehension. None of your staff could adequately defend the rationale for your 90-20 scale, although they made valiant efforts to do so on behalf of the University. It seems to me that this disadvantages your best students who fall with mark distributions near the Distinction borderline. I would recommend that you revert to a 0-100 scale were it not the last year of the programme in 2011-12.

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

Yes. Everything I could have asked for was made available to me. It was exemplary.

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

Yes. It was exemplary.

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

Yes, these were in place, and were taken into consideration in an appropriate manner.

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.

These are great programmes, and I would have no hesitation in taking on a Masters student from SEE, Leeds, for a PhD, for example, because I know that they will have been properly schooled in the array of critical, analytical and quantitative skills that a professional geochemist needs. I also commend the quality of the teaching – most of the staff were thought to be excellent educators most of the time by the student cohort – and the quality of the student support from the academic staff. The Course Director and the lecturing staff were considered to be very accessible and very helpful throughout the duration of the programme. I commend the high standards set and attained, and the high level of care that the student cohort receives.



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Head of School of Earth and Environment
University of Leeds
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21st February 2012

Dear

Re: Response to External Examiner's Report (MSc, PGDip Environmental Geochemistry/Geochemistry), 2010/11

Thank you for the very positive comments provided in your report. It is satisfying to hear that you found both the achievements of the students and the quality of the teaching to be of such a high standard.

You raise two main issues in your report. Firstly, the University's 20-90 marking scale. As you are aware this is a university wide marking scale. The University is intent on this being a common scale throughout the institution, although several Schools have stated their reservations. We have continued to make representations to the University regarding this and hope that it will be modified. I accept that it is the non-linearity in the scale which makes for additional problems.

Secondly, the issue of academic discretionary criteria is one which the School is currently addressing. The School is undertaking a review of its discretionary criteria with a view to making these less restrictive. In this way the award of the higher classification may be made on the basis of an exceptional performance in a key area of the curriculum. This does give us considerably more latitude for academic discretion and is probably more consistent with award criteria at this level elsewhere in the sector. Additionally it means that we have the potential to avoid disadvantaging students near the Distinction borderline with outstanding strengths in, for example, project work.

I hope this addresses the key issues in your report. The School recognises the concerns over the 20-90 marking scale. We will continue to raise this issue and keep you informed of any developments in this area.

Thanks once again for your reflections on the programme. We look forward to seeing you again next year.

Yours sincerely

Head of School