

# 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>	Faculty of Environment/School of Earth & Environment
<i>Subject(s):</i>	List below
<i>Programme(s) / Module(s):</i>	MSc Sustainability (Environment and Development) MSc Sustainability (Environmental Politics and Policy) MSc Sustainability (Climate Change)  SOEE5020M Research Project SOEE5051M Business, Environment and Sustainability SOEE5481M Introduction to Sustainability SOEE5471M Environmental Governance and Sustainability SOEE5495M Critical Perspectives on Environment and Development SOEE5540M Environment – Development Overseas Field Course SOEE5540M Climate Change Physical Sciences Basis SOEE5550M Climate Change Impacts and Adaptation SOEE5561M Climate Change Mitigation
<i>Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):</i>	MSc

#### 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*

No

#### 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?*

No

**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

**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 programmes reviewed had clearly communicated aims, covering appropriate content and relevant themes for the subjects – the ILOs for the modules taken were appropriate for MSc level and the mechanisms by which students would achieve these were clearly outlined.

These programmes were clearly structured with an appropriate mix of core modules as well as optional selection by students. The students also had an opportunity to undertake an independent research project and for those on the Environment and Development programme, a related fieldtrip, which was clearly of value to those students, enhancing employability and the identity of that programme.

The upcoming changes for 2015 look to help strengthen programme identity and rationalise the range of courses on offer.

**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.*

Yes

**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 was a good range of assessment types across the modules, affording students the opportunity to show their learning – these methods were appropriateness to the module ILOs and, together with assessment criteria, were clearly communicated to students via the module handbooks. There were a number of creative assessments and activities that were well received by students. Overall there was balance and consistency in the marking applied, with a full range of marks used. Moving forward, programme directors may wish to be mindful of over assessment when looking across the full spectrum of modules taken – while there is a balance to strike between a range of assessment methods per module, the cumulative assessment workload may be more extensive when experienced by the student – programme directors may wish to reflect on possibilities of reducing overlapping assessment type across core modules and avoiding overload at busy times of the year for the student. While bunching of assessment was not something reported extensively in the evaluations, it was mentioned. It was not an aspect explored in the review in detail. It may also be worth reflecting on the consistency of assessment across modules such that some 15 credit modules do not incur particularly greater workloads than others, unless there are strategic learning reasons why that should be the case.

There was overall excellent transparency in the arrangements for moderation and marking in relation to the classifications.

Overall, based on the evaluation forms provided by students, I inferred that students were generally positive about the quality of teaching that they had received, that their learning needs had been addressed, and they were clearly appreciative of the efforts of staff to provide participatory engagement and a range of teaching approaches. Particular modules which students had strongly positive feedback – Climate Change Mitigation and the innovative exercises, critical perspectives in Environment and Development, Climate change physical science basis. There were also some notable points about specific modules which were discussed in the BoE:

SOEE5051M Business, Environment and Sustainability – was difficult to judge the marking for the VLE postings - I understood in the BoE that clearer marking criteria will be provided to students this year. As a proportion, 25% is a significant part of the total mark and for a large class a high marking burden. Clearly this weighting creates a signal/incentive for students to engage. There was good feedback given to students on the assignments.

SOEE5550 Climate Change Impacts and Adaptation – while this module offered clear learning outcomes broken down by class, students evaluations appeared to single this module out as disjointed and in need of further attention. Developing coherency as experienced by the student and matching module description with range of content delivery may need future attention. Additionally, although clear guidance had been given for the group assignment it was noted that the marks were low (averaging 57.2) suggesting that there may have been some aspect of technical lack of understanding on the part of the students, given that there was a higher range of marks for the essay, with students who excelled in this component, doing poorly in the assessment for the impacts component – this had the impact of pulling the overall marks down for some students with strong portfolios overall.

SOEE5483 Critical perspectives in Environment and Development – assessed a range of understanding, with positive feedback on teaching staff and their participatory approach to learning. There may be opportunity to focus the assessment towards the critical analysis, which the students seemed less sure about. This was discussed with the module convenor.

SOEE5495 Overseas field course to Tanzania – positive addition to curriculum for Environment and Development students with positive feedback about staff organisation. Students noted that timeframe to do their analysis and prepare a presentation was tight – this is a common challenge for managed field classes however.

SOEE5281 Introduction to Sustainability – the essay assessment for this module was the first to be completed by students – the average grade was 57.85 with 18% failing. This raises two points. That moderation raised a number of grades, which was appropriate, but it may be that greater explanation of expectations to students is needed. As this an early term assignment, it may be more useful to students if converted into a formative piece of work rather than being assessed. It was made clear in the BoE this was already being addressed this year and additionally the module was trialling front-loaded delivery presenting an opportunity to emphasise formative learning.

SOEE5471M Environmental governance and sustainability – impressive range of content with clear learning outcomes, with students appreciative of speakers. One challenge of wide ranging content is ensuring connectivity across the sessions.

Borderline and a sample of coursework and exam scripts were reviewed from each award category for all modules.

**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.*

Overall students had been given adequate opportunity to demonstrate their achievement of the aims and ILOs as noted above– and these are comparable to other courses in the area. The year reviewed appeared to be an average cohort with a sub-set of students who excelled - and a sub-set of students, predominantly international students, who struggled for various reasons. This is not an uncommon situation when compared to other institutions. It raises questions about ways to support those weaker students once they are admitted on courses, the additional in-session language or learning support they will need and ways to encourage them to uptake this support. In the BoE, the effort made by staff to facilitate this for the weaker students reviewed in the meeting was apparent.

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. **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.*

Unable to comment as first year and prior examiner reports/school response were not made available

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.*

Based on the information provided in the module handbooks and each curriculum outline, it was clear that modules incorporated a range of interesting examples from current research together with relevant case studies and illustrations from policy and practice. There were clearly efforts made to connect to the teaching and learning environment, offering students a way of relating theory and practice. The evaluations highlighted that this was particularly appreciated by students. The courses offer the opportunity to understand the role of independent research through SOEE5020M as well as fieldwork practice.

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

N/A

#### 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**

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#### 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.*

Was provided with sufficient information about the role of external examiners in advance including a paper copy of the handbook, website guidance and details of classifications/rules.

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.*

Documentation provided for review: module handbooks, marking criteria (for some modules), evaluations, moderation forms, marks spreadsheets by module, dissertations, student portfolios and examination scripts and papers

Student support staff were extremely helpful in providing additional information requested:

- programme specifications
- the breakdown of marks for SOEE5561M climate change mitigation were not available, only the final percentage and the moderation form (it is useful to see the full marks for different component parts for a module together with mean and SD)
- Clarifications on missing coursework
- Requested marker comments for selected SOEE5020M projects (to review a sample) – these were

not included with the projects although they were for the consultancy project. In seeing select examples, an inconsistency in paperwork was highlighted but was resolved in the BoE. It may be worth being mindful of the challenge we all face to ensure transparency and consistency in marking when a range of markers with varying expertise and a wide range of topics exist.

**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?**

Examination and coursework questions were available – these were of an appropriate nature and level

**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?**

Student coursework was available in student portfolios, the majority were available (one was not available and there was some missing work in some portfolios – but this is understandable where students may not return the work). The examination scripts and resits were available.

The detail of feedback to students varied between markers but overall the standard feedback sheet was sufficient to provide justification of the mark and some guidance on how to improve. Some assignments were annotated. Overall the system was transparent and criteria clear. Student evaluations did not pick up feedback issues although it depends on the timing of when the evaluations were administered.

The marks were presented by module and as I was asked to only look at students from particular programmes it would be helpful if next year the spreadsheet with marks for each module could have an extra column indicating which degree to which the student was registered so as to reduce the time trying to identify a relevant sample of students associated with the programmes. It would also be helpful to have a separate list of students per programme as this was only indicated on the boxes containing the student portfolios.

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

The choice of subjects was wide ranging but relevant to their degree.

In future it would be helpful to have printed copies of the markers comments and grades with each dissertation or perhaps to just receive a selection to review in advance, together with these first and second markers comments. A sample from across those available was reviewed on this occasion – marks were appropriate although there were a large number of dissertations requiring 3<sup>rd</sup> marking and some inconsistency in grades at the higher end, one case was raised due to inconsistencies in the associated paperwork as noted above (but resolved in the BoE).

**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?**

I attended the BoE meeting, which was well organised and run efficiently and every effort made to provide additional information and respond to questions prior the meeting. I was happy with the recommendations of the Board – specific cases were discussed and agreed.

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

It was apparent that special cases due to mitigating circumstances had been given appropriate attention throughout the year and considered on a case by case basis where appropriate in the BoE.

**Other comments**

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

General request - next year to have a little more space to review as there a number of boxes and folders/if feasible a hotel location nearer to the university/station to save costs to the university and time.

**School of Earth and Environment**

University of Leeds  
Leeds LS2 9JT



**UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS**

18 November 2014

Dear

**RE: Response to External Examiner's Report - MSc Sustainability (Environment and Development); MSc Sustainability (Environmental Politics and Policy); MSc Sustainability (Climate Change); 2013-14**

Sincere thanks for examining our MSc programmes for the last academic session. Your views are an essential part of our quality assurance mechanism and we very much welcome your input into our teaching processes.

We are very pleased to hear that you are satisfied with the overall quality of the Masters programmes and that you consider our programmes to be well structured, appropriate and generally well received by students. We are happy to see that you appreciated our efforts to apply a good range of teaching approaches and assessment types for our students across the modules and that you are happy with our marking and moderation processes.

We appreciate your recognition of the strong positive student feedback on the following modules: Climate Change Mitigation, Climate Change Physical Science basis and Critical Perspectives in Environment & Development modules. We have passed on positive sentiments to the module leaders of these modules.

We are happy that you feel that the upcoming programme changes look to help strengthen programme identity and rationalise the range of courses on offer.

We are thrilled to see that you consider there are currently no matters that require urgent attention, and appreciate the suggestions you have made for our consideration. We respond to each of these in turn below.

With regard to assessment – we concur with your suggestion to look across the modules to assess whether students are over-loaded at particular times of the year and to check the volume of assessment across 15 credit modules to ensure consistency. As part of a School-wide student education strategy we are in the process of mapping the volume, type and timing of assessment across our programmes at Masters level. This will help us to identify peaks in workload, assess the appropriateness of assessment in relation to programme level knowledge and skills outcomes, and to check for consistency of assessment volume across the modules. This process will be undertaken November/December this year and inform module and programme level changes proposed for 2015 entry.

With regard to your point made about a sub-set of students, predominantly international students, who struggled for various reasons last year and the suggestion to consider the ways in which we are supporting these students:

Regarding language - In recent years we have increased our IELTS entry requirements from 6.0 overall to '6.5 overall with not less than 6.0 in listening, reading, speaking and writing'. As a consequence, on the Sustainability Masters programmes we are only seeing a very small number of students struggling with language. At one-to-one meetings with Programme Leaders in induction week Programme Leaders strongly recommend to individuals who are clearly struggling or likely to struggle with language to visit the Language Centre and undergo assessment for support needs. The vast majority do take our advice, but some do not and struggle more as a consequence.

Regarding support provision for transition to UK and Leeds-based expectations, systems and structures – Students are supported by Personal Tutors from the Sustainability Research Institute who monitor their progression a minimum of twice in semester 1 and once in semester 2. Students will also have a dissertation supervisor who supports them through their research projects. In addition to this basic level of provision, last year, for the first time, we laid on three MSc Sustainability ad-hoc skills support sessions for students who felt they needed additional support. This support was specifically designed to support students adjust to the expectations of, and to provide them with skills appropriate for study at Masters level in Sustainability. This support continues this year and has been made official in the 'Introduction to Sustainability module' as an optional component, ensuring students are fully aware of the support available to them and to ensure timetabling of sessions is suitable for all. In addition to School level support, students are referred to University Level resources and support provided by Skills@Library <http://library.leeds.ac.uk/skills>. This resource provides online materials as well as group and individual support to students across the University on a wide range of issues associated with learning.

On matters raised for consideration at the module level, we tackle each of these in turn below:

**SOEE5051 Business, Environment & Sustainability** – A revised (and hopefully clearer) marking sheet has now been included in the module handbook for VLE postings. In addition, the module leader provides in-class comments right after each of the five individual VLE assignments are submitted, highlighting best practice and how the marking criteria apply to these individual assignments. Students should therefore have a very clear idea about what is expected from them and how their assignments will be marked.

**SOEE5550 Climate Change Impacts and Adaptation** – A thorough review of this module is planned. Particular focus will be given to making the natural science component more accessible and the assessments of the group project comparable to that of the essay. will be assisting with this.

**SOEE5483 Critical Perspectives of Environment & Development** – Rationalisation of assessment from 3 to 2 assignments on this module is being considered for next year. Alongside this change the module leader and teaching staff will consider your suggestion to focus on the critical analysis with which we agree.

**SOEE5495 Environment-Development Overseas Field Course** –When finalising the schedule for this year's field course, finding time to increase the time students have for preliminary analysis and the preparation of presentations in the field will be considered.

**SOEE5281 Introduction to Sustainability** – The first essay had a low average mark and a high number of fails because it is often the first social science essay written by many students. We recruit a high number of overseas students and students from engineering or science

backgrounds, who have never written an academic essay like this before. We do take great care to explain our expectations to students, and to provide them with support. The module leader gives a one hour lecture on how to do well in the assignment, a number of drop in sessions are arranged with a graduate teaching assistant, and students are made aware of central support available, such as through the library. This will continue in future. It is worth noting that no student failed this module solely because they failed this first assignment, but rather because they also failed other assignments in the module. As of this year, this essay will be formative rather than contributing to the module mark, in response to student feedback. In order to enhance student learning from the assignment, anonymous peer marking has also been introduced alongside the module leader's marking. So far this academic year, the front-loaded delivery of this module has been well received by staff and students as it allows accelerated learning of fundamental concepts. This should also assist students in their learning.

**SOEE5471 Environmental Governance & Sustainability** – For 2014-15 SOEE5471 has actually changed to SOEE5472 Environmental Policy and Governance and is taught in the first semester. The course content has changed slightly to make it more focused around the concepts of policy and governance. Although the content is still wide ranging in places (given this is a core introductory module for most courses), I expect that there will be stronger connectivity between sessions. Instead of having external speakers for seminars, we are doing more practical participatory workshops applying analytical approaches to case studies.

On matters relating to administration of the external examining process - we very much appreciate the encouragement you provided to [redacted] in first week in administrative role in the Student Education Service and your understanding of that. With regards to the minor administrative gaps noted during your visit, we will ensure complete records of mark breakdowns across modules and explanations for any missing coursework.

We have taken note of your suggestions on how the administrative processes might better assist you. Next year we will provide you with 1) a spreadsheet with an extra column indicating the degree to which the student was registered, and 2) a separate list of students per programme. With regard to the dissertation paperwork (SOEE5020) - we do not foresee any problems with providing printed copies of markers and moderator comments sheets for each dissertation in the future and will provide a selection of dissertations to review in advance of your visit.

We apologise that due to building work going on in the School at the time of your visit there was some limitation with regards to work space. We will do our best to provide a larger working area for your next visit and note that a more central hotel location, providing easy access to Leeds train station is preferable.

We trust this response has comprehensively responded to your very helpful suggestions and clarified our direction forwards. Thank you once again for your close scrutiny of our MSc programmes. We are very grateful for your encouragement and helpful critique. We believe your input will make a positive difference to our programmes over the next few years.

Yours sincerely,