

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

PART A: GENERAL INFORMATION

Subject area and awards being examined:

School of: Geography

Programme(s) / Module(s):

BA Geography

BA Geography with Transport, etc.

Subject awards: (e.g.
BA/BSc/MSc etc.)

BA

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.

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?

N/A

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 am very happy to confirm my overall satisfaction that the Leeds School of Geography is doing an extremely good job: in its learning and teaching provision; in how it handles its assessment duties, from both individual staff marking particular assessments through to the efforts of the collectivity in running the final Examination Board; in how it endeavours to maintain the quality and standards of student work, so that 1sts, 2.1s, etc. awarded by the School are easily comparable to those awarded elsewhere; and finally in the running through of all procedures that involve the External Examiners. There appear to have been some improvements made during my time as External, and I can see that some of my specific suggestions have been acted upon (others maybe not, albeit always with good reason). There remains a strong impression that the School is very self-critical, continually reviewing the strengths and weaknesses of what it is doing, as well as responding to student feedback, and so there is no sense of the School 'resting on its laurels', becoming complacent or being resistant to change. Yes, I have quibbled about a few specific issues and practices, and will do so again in this report, but nothing should detract from the overall picture of a top-class Geography department taking very seriously all of its responsibilities towards its students, while also accomplishing so much in other respects (as clearly a leading UK centre of geographical and environmental research). This is a fiendishly hard balancing act to get right, but, as far as I can judge, the Leeds School of Geography is managing to excel on all fronts – which is evidently not true of all roughly equivalent departments. I would hope that the School's success in this regard can be fully acknowledged at University level, and appropriately rewarded if at all possible (with new investment, appointments, etc.).

If I have any broader criticisms, it would be directed not at the School but at the wider University of Leeds context, in that, as voiced in previous reports, I am less than happy with what appears to be a growing pressure to alter the role played here by External Examiners. Indeed, I sense that the University would prefer its Externals to be quite 'docile' rubber-stampers of paperwork – glorified moderators of specific courses – where a bureaucratic quality assurance role takes precedence over the genuinely engaged work of an External Examiner who assists the School in taking decisions on border-line candidates, perhaps with the power to suggest (wholly reasoned) movements of marks, and who thereby acquires a measure of (to me) crucial 'ownership' over the overall examining process and decision-making of a School (a position from where, I would argue, an External is then most empowered to add substantial *value* to this core aspect of School activity). For me, this (2010-2011) was the first year when my own work as a Leeds External shifted almost entirely away from marginal cases to reviewing modules, and, if it is a sign of things to come, I guess that I am glad that my period as an External at Leeds has ended. (And I now gather it may be proposed that Externals do not spend two or three days 'embedded' in a School, working closely with the staff there, but rather just parachute in for Examination Boards: that strikes me as completely misjudged, since it will substantially foreclose on the vital collaborative, face-to-face dialogue-based engagement that, to my mind, is what Externaling should be all about [to the benefit of the School in question]). A final critical point is that, if the University does wish its Externals to be undertaking more moderation-type activity, then it has to be accepted that such work needs to be directed at meaningfully large samples of student work, something that it is near-impossible for an External to achieve in the time available (and I am sure that Externals are not going to like being asked, for instance, to undertake a lot of moderation-type activity *at home* prior to attending the Examination Board).

I would wish finally to record my formal thanks to the School – specifically to the respective Examination Officers and their associated administrative teams, but also to the Heads of Schools over my period – for making the experience of Externaling at Leeds a thoroughly pleasant and stimulating one.

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.*

I have no concerns that the ILOs are commensurate with the levels of the award.

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 far as I can judge, 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.*

My general remarks on this count are exactly the same as last year: everything, broadly-speaking, is excellent. That said, there are occasional mismatches between the *marking criteria* and the marks being awarded to students for quite specific pieces of work. One key issue is the apparent requirement that, not just for a 1st but also for a 2.1, a student should display evidence of academic reading in their work. However, some student work, notably more ‘technical’ exercises but also some examination essays, is being marked at 2.1 or even 1st-class standard *without* demonstrating such reading. Now, in part this is because there is simply no room in more ‘technical’ exercises for such a scholarly demonstration, and, quite understandably, the exercise can be completed to a high standard without any referencing of literature – which suggests that perhaps there should be more *specific* criteria for certain exercises, notably ‘technical’ ones, which make clear that the display of other skills, not conventional scholarly ones, is indeed being rewarded. To my mind, though, students can still reasonably be expected to make use of literature in examination essays, if not to quote and reference so precisely, and perhaps there is a general message here needing to be conveyed more clearly to students.

Last year, I was asked to look at a particular 2nd-year module, GEOG2820 (‘Cities and Regions’), where there were concerns about both *course content* and *over-marking* (possibly with, as I found, some *under-marking* as well). I am content that the School handled this matter properly through some very careful mark adjustments, and it also seems clear that care has also been taken to keep these adjustments in mind when reviewing the current graduating class (to ensure that the marks awarded here for marginal cases have always been double-checked to ensure that nobody is being inappropriately disadvantaged). This year, I was asked to look again at this module, which I did. I considered the module documentation, which arguably could have been sharpened up a little and its range of suggested readings enlarged, but I was satisfied that the coursework assessment was sufficiently stretching – with ‘space’ for students to demonstrate conceptual/literature grasp as well as a ‘technical’ competency – for an assessment at this level. I examined a sample of c.40 examination essays, and, to be honest, found further evidence of somewhat erratic marking – nothing all that untoward, but a touch puzzling in places – with seemingly quite thin and narrow essays sometimes securing higher marks than ones which did reference literature/adopt a more critical tone. I gather that this module is being wholly reviewed/revised for the next academic session, which is perhaps the best thing that could happen, certainly if it is made more focussed.

Last year, I tentatively raised a criticism of a suite of modules taught within the orbit of spatial modelling/spatial analysis (which would include GEOG2820), my concern precisely *not* being with these modules *per se* – indeed, these modules lend something very distinctive to the overall profile of Leeds learning and teaching in human geography, as well as offering highly ‘employable’ skills training – but rather with difficulties in discriminating between the best student work, coupled to the possibility that too many high marks are being awarded to students *simply* for being ‘technically’ proficient (eg. in making/using GISes). How exactly can a 1st be discriminated from a 2.1 or even lower, particularly in more ‘technical’ exercises or even in examination essays seeking technique- or factual-knowledge based answers? I was duly asked to look at one such module, GEOG2230 (‘GIS Spatial Analysis’), where it had also been wondered on the basis of this year’s internal moderation whether some *over-marking* was occurring. An internal moderator acknowledged that: “Given the nature of the course, there is the ability for a student to score very high marks.” I considered the module documentation, which was sound, and also examined the work (assessments and examination essays) of c.25 students. As for the coursework assessments – which were linked to *practicals* with a highly ‘technical’ dimension; practicals that, I might add, had clearly

demanded a *great deal* of effort to set up, run and mark (with pleasing evidence of the course leader attempting to ensure consistency of marking by his marking team) – I concluded here that, notwithstanding the focus on more ‘technical’ skills, there was sufficient room, notably in an ‘extended research’ section in several of the practicals, for students to demonstrate real ‘value-added’ achievement (with those students who took this step, often bringing in other literatures and examples, being rightly rewarded with the very highest marks). As for the examination essays, I did locate a problem of sorts in some questions/answers, since from the course leader’s ‘model answer sheet’, it was evident that sometimes allocates marks solely for ‘technical’ competence and/or quite specific demonstrations of knowledge, with no room being given for students who do *that bit more* – who might introduce critical observations about the limitations of methods or draw on literatures, concepts and other examples – to be rewarded. In short, students could get top marks on these questions without this ‘bit more’, which, if it appeared, was then unrewarded. A simple solution would be for the marker to recalibrate marking scheme here, reserving a few extra marks ‘at the top’ for that handful of students doing the ‘bit more’. The outcome would be that *only* those students would receive the very highest marks, which might then have the overall effect of slightly reducing the mean marks for the module (from their present level, slightly on the high side). In summary here, however, I still did not think that there was anything sufficiently/*systematically* worrying about the marking of this module to propose a blanket downward adjustment of the marks, and I recommended leaving everything ‘as is’ – but with the suggestion above as to how the marker might change one specific aspect of marking practice for future years. As it happens, I had a collegial discussion after the Examination Board with the staff member in question, who appeared to be positively taken with my suggestion.

In a similar vein, I was asked to look at another (part of a) module, namely the Montpellier field class as part of GEOG2730 (‘Human Field Class’). The Montpellier field class, run by members of the same spatial modelling/spatial analysis grouping, appears to be delivering higher marks than are the other two field classes run for human geographers (Trieste and Helsinki). I considered the module documentation for all three field classes, and that for both Montpellier and Trieste seemed in very good shape (that for Helsinki arguably needs beefing up). Once I dug into the Montpellier documentation and assessments, as well as examining the work of c.15 students on this field class, I satisfied myself that – possible initial impressions to the contrary, for instance from the opening questions on a basic worksheet – there is actually an appropriately demanding set of exercises for the students to undertake. Indeed, the latter part of the just-mentioned worksheet potentially demands a great deal of conceptual imagination/lateral thinking in order to be answered well, while I found some excellent examples of students operating at a high/critical level in completing their fieldwork reports (using literature, undertaking extra independent ‘research’). Yes, there are moments when I might say that some relatively mediocre work was being rewarded with 2.1 marks, as well as one or two occasions where students doing that ‘bit more’ (as above) were perhaps not being quite rewarded enough. The staff members should look out for such discrepancies in future years, and encourage students always to ‘stretch themselves’, but my summary conclusion here was, once again, that there was insufficient warrant to suggest a blanket downward adjustment of the marks.

Furthermore, I may be wrong, but from what I have seen this year my overall assessment is that the staff members running the spatial modelling/spatial analysis suite of modules *have* taken on board some of my criticisms/suggestions from last year, and are starting to devise ways of stretching and rewarding their best students. Maybe they also need to be more ready to drop some student work down into the 2.2s as well – I do detect a certain reluctance to use marks below 50% – and maybe there is still more to be done to facilitate a greater *critical* and *reading-based* approach to (some) exercises, but my sense is that things are moving along the right lines. Indeed, in conversation after the Examination Board with relevant staff members, we had a really good exchange, and I derived a feeling that they were very prepared to work *with* the rest of the School in this respect – and that a two-way dialogue is indeed possible and the way to go here. I might add that such an exchange was *only* possible because I have spent time *in* the School over the past four years, getting to know staff members and developing, I hope, the possibility for constructive relations with them over such matters.

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, but do also see my responses above in answer to 3. The External Examiners met a small cohort of students, who offered some exceptional feedback on an “overall positive experience” in Geography at Leeds, with references to “amazing staff” who could not be more “supportive”, and with one student saying that had “absolutely loved” third year. The School can be justifiably proud in the light of such responses. Sure, there were a few remarks with a more negative bite, with particular worries about the ‘free rider’ in groupwork, but these were of a nitpicky character compared to the overall positivity.

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.

See my overall assessment above as a departing External Examiner. Also, more specifically, I can see that the School has reviewed and changed its dissertation guidelines, one quite specific area of minor criticism from my report last year; and, more broadly, it strikes me that serious efforts are being made to address the kinds of difficulties discussed in 3. above (and please compare my comments last year with those made this year).

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.

I would simply reiterate my comments here from last year.

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, absolutely.

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, absolutely.

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

Yes, I considered a fair amount of student work in association with the modules where my input was requested, as reported in some detail at 3. above. I looked in particular at the work of three 'maker' candidates from the graduating cohort (one seemingly a clear 1st, one a 2.1 and one a 2.2), and I was very happy to confirm their allocation to these degree classes. I also assisted in the final decisions being made on three 3rd-year students where there was still some uncertainty about their final degree classes, but always in the context of looking at students around them in the ranked distribution.

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

Yes, absolutely.

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

Yes, absolutely.

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.

School of Geography
University of Leeds
Leeds LS2 9JT



18 October 2011

Response by the Head of School to the BA External Examiner's Report

Dear

I am writing to thank you for your detailed and thorough evaluation of our BA programme this year. The School very much welcomes your informed perspective on the quality and philosophy of our courses, and we are very grateful for your support.

We were extremely pleased to see that you continue to consider our programme is providing extremely good learning and teaching provision, and that our staff are engaged with the process of ensuring the quality of our assessment. Additionally, it is pleasing to hear that a self-selecting group of students were very complimentary about the staff and teaching in the School. I am glad to see that you deem the recent amendments to some of our procedures (e.g. dissertation guidelines) as positive innovations.

Your report mentions two matters that the School should continue to work to improve:

- (1) Continuing issues around GEOG2820 Cities and Regions;
- (2) Marking of technical work for GIS practical classes;

Concerning the issues surrounding GEOG2820, the module is running for the current academic year with some changes to the content, and we will be making more effort to monitor closely the marking of assessments to ensure comparability across the student cohort. Thereafter, the module will be discontinued in its current format because the BA Geography curriculum is in the process of being redesigned across all levels. One aim of the redesign process is to develop more team taught modules. We anticipate that this approach will help to avoid some of the issues encountered in this module by enabling closer 'internal' scrutiny of staff members by other academics who are teaching the same modules.

With respect to the development and marking of GIS practical reports (and other practical assessments generally), we are in the process of updating our guidelines for module leaders who wish to use such approaches for summative purposes. These guidelines exist but have clearly not been adhered to in some cases. We will include more explicit requirements for practical classes to be extended beyond the technical aspects, so as to assess understanding of aspects such as data quality, reliability of analytical methods and to critically evaluate the potential for results to be applied in the real world. As you pointed out, some colleagues have already taken on board your constructive feedback and have begun

to implement these changes already. We are confident that this problem can be ironed out in the forthcoming session.

I also note your comments regarding changes to the University's central administration procedures and will bring these to the attention of the Academic Quality and Standards Team Office.

I very much hope that this response both acknowledges your very positive overall assessment of our degree processes, clarifies our processes where required and responds in a constructive way to the weaknesses that you have identified. Thank you once more for the four years that you have spent editing exam questions, reading students' work, attending our Examination Board meetings and writing your detailed and helpful reports. Your commitment and support is much appreciated.

Yours sincerely

Head of School

Head of School