

The University of Leeds**EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT**

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2011– 2012

Part A: General Information**Subject area and awards being examined**

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| Faculty / School of: | School of Geography |
| Subject(s): | Human Geography |
| Programme(s) / Module(s): | BA Geography, BA Geography with Transport Planning |
| Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc): | BA |

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 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

There are two issues which need attention:

First, for module G1035 Leeds: Local to Global – this is an interesting module and one which challenges the students. Student feedback seemed to be mixed – some really enjoyed the module and got a lot out of it, others were fairly negative about their experiences. The module moderation form also contains the staff comment that “it is hard to get a really good mark” for the module, which indicates that some reflection is needed on the range and type of assignments being used. I think the School should continue with this module, but consider if the current amount of group work involved is appropriate or whether this could be reduced. This might help address some of the students’ concerns about the module. The module instructions could also be made clearer and simpler so that students are very clear as to what is required of them to participate fully in the module.

Second, for modules with a reflective log component, there was some variability in module feedback and marking guidelines for these could be made clear to staff with a more specific set of guidelines produced for such assignments. Currently one set of marking criteria are utilised for a variety of different assessment types and these do not always fit well with some forms of assessment, such as reflective logs. The School should consider whether different marking criteria are needed for different types of assessment.

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, I received these at the time of my initial appointment as external examiner and I also saw the School’s response to these. I followed up some of the issues raised by the previous external examiner, where applicable, to check that these had been addressed. In particular I looked at assessed work for the module G2230 GIS and Spatial Analysis where the previous external examiner had raised concerns about the need to mark ‘beyond’ technical skills. Marking for this module now appears to be subject to a good process and there were some very good comments on the assessed work by the markers and module leader, as well as from the moderator on the feedback sheets. While I did not see the assignments, it is clear from the student mark sheets that students are now being marked on the interpretation of the results obtained, as well as their technical abilities.

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

Not applicable

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 Intended Learning Outcomes are appropriate for the programmes of study and with the levels of the award. The human geography components of the degree programmes provide a stimulating and challenging range of modules for the students. These clearly provide students with subject-specific skills, but also with broader transferable skills. The learning outcomes encourage students to engage with employability skills, specifically in those modules targeted at these outcomes, but they are also present in more academically-focused modules.

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, the aims and ILOs are comparable with similar programmes at other institutions that I have knowledge of, and compatible with subject benchmarks. The programme provides a number of high quality modules that cover the majority of disciplinary and sub-disciplinary debates within Human Geography.

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 assessment methods are appropriate for the ILOs. A variety of assessment methods are used within the School in order to test different types of knowledge, students' ability to research into a topic, as well as analytical and interpretative skills. Arrangements for marking of the modules and the classification of awards are also appropriate and well thought out. For modules with a reflective log component, there was some variability in module feedback and marking guidelines for these could be made clear to staff. Module feedback forms were, for the most part, very good with all level 3 modules meeting the Leeds 'gold standard'. Modules at other levels may need to be kept under review in some cases. While the tick box sheets do provide feedback, some more detailed comments would also assist students.

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 this came through in student performance in individual modules and for the programme as a whole where students' academic standards were clearly demonstrated. The module evaluation forms were particularly helpful in taking note of student feedback and the actions that had been taken to respond to this. The external examiners met with a small group of students and these were full of praise for both the programme and for the commitment and enthusiasm of staff.

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

Not applicable

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.

The module moderation forms now being used are good and provide a clear outline of student performance, as well as providing the opportunity for moderators to reflect on the module as a whole and to provide constructive feedback to module leaders. These are very comprehensive forms which allow reflection on the nature and effectiveness of individual modules drawing on a wide range of information and student feedback.

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.

There is evidence that staff research feeds into individual module delivery and also through student field work. Students appear to appreciate the enthusiasm for the subject material and for teaching that arises from staff engagement with research.

For Examiners involved in mentoring arrangements

8. If you have acted as a mentor to a new External Examiner or have received mentor support please comment here on the arrangements

I had very helpful support and advice from the Physical Geography external examiner which, while not fulfilling a formal mentoring role, proved invaluable in my first year of examining.

9. 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, clear guidance is provided in the External Examiner Handbook and also from information sent out in advance by the School.

10. 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. I received copies of the School's Code of Practice on Assessment and the Undergraduate Student Handbook, as well as dissertation guidelines and the module and programme catalogue. Minutes of the Student-Staff Forum and full details of mitigating circumstances and medical evidence were also made available during my visit to the School.

11. 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, I saw draft examination papers and assessments at an early stage of the year. For the most part the nature and level of the questions were appropriate. For a few of these I suggested some minor changes and these were incorporated into the final versions.

12. 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. I saw a range of assessed and examined work. This included the complete work of some students at all levels of degree classification and this was helpful in allowing a consideration of the standards being applied to students' work. In addition, assessed/examined work was made available for a range of modules and I sampled these to ensure that the evaluation of student work was appropriate. The exam scripts and assessed work were clearly marked, with some excellent feedback provided. I was asked to consider a number of students in the discretionary band and with mitigating circumstances and made recommendations to the Board of Examiners which were adopted by the Board.

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

With one exception the choice of subjects was appropriate. In one case, which the School asked me to look at, the subject was non-geographical. The School's own guidelines make it clear to students that the dissertation is "an opportunity to develop research in an area of Geography" and that "BA students must choose a human geography topic". In the particular case I looked at clearer guidance could have been provided by staff to make certain that the geographical aspects of the research were included. Despite the clarity of the current guidelines, the School might like to consider if this needs to be made more explicit in the dissertation handbook. The method and standard of assessment for dissertations was appropriate, though it might be more helpful to students to have a formative assessment early on in the process – probably at the first interim report stage. This issue was also discussed at the meeting with students, which indicated support for this (albeit from a limited number of students). Students also raised the issue of not being able to use work from the first two assignments in their final dissertation due to concerns over self-plagiarism. Given the nature of dissertations and the need to build on previous work, this seems inappropriate if this is the case.

14. 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, the administrative arrangements for the whole process are entirely satisfactory. I attended the Board of Examiners and this was conducted in a fair and rigorous manner. The recommendations of the Board were also entirely satisfactory. I note that the Board is now conducted so as to anonymise students and this is in line with good practice in other institutions.

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

Yes, it was clear the due consideration had been given to both mitigating circumstances and medical evidence. I was able to see full details of the relevant material and to cross check this against decisions that had been made with regard to individual students.

Other comments

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



School of Geography
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18 July 2012

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 consider our programme is "stimulating and challenging" both in a subject-specific sense and with respect to transferable skills, comparable with other HE institutes offering BA Geography programmes, and compatible with national subject benchmarks. We are pleased that you consider our module evaluation process to be comprehensive and suitable for providing clear outlines of performance and opportunities for reflection, as we have recently made some substantial changes to this part of our quality control. Additionally, it is very 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 consider the amendments to the technical practicals in our GIS modules as addressing the concerns of our previous BA external examiner, <<>>.

Your report mentions two matters that the School should work to improve as a matter of urgency:

- (1) Issues regarding the new Level 1 module GEOG1035 *Leeds: local to global*
- (2) Ensure comparability in the marking of reflective logs across modules

Concerning the issues surrounding GEOG1035, this module ran for the first time this year following our revision of the curriculum, common to many new modules it has produced some teething issues which will be rectified next year. We have already made a decision to reduce the amount of group work, and the convenor (<<>>) plans to re-write the student guidance, perhaps producing separate module handbooks for the two variants of the module. We are also thinking of ways in which to convey more effectively to the students the role and value of group work, part of which includes taking some advice from the School of Engineering who have experienced similar problems in the past. These changes will be implemented in time for the 2012/13 session beginning in September.

With respect to the development and marking of reflective logs, we are in the process of creating marking criteria for various forms of assessment and intend to include your suggestion as part of the process. Our plan is to create generic frameworks (similar to the ones we possess already for essays and

practical classes) for most types of assessment. Our intention is that these will be used alongside additional marking criteria specific to each assessment. We will aim to have these ready for implementation by staff in January 2013.

In respect to some of the minor issues you raised, dissertation handbooks (including general guidance and marking criteria) will be edited to make clearer the need for students to follow a geographical topic. The nature of dissertation interim reports has already been altered so that from 2012-13 these will be assessed on a formative basis only, with feedback provided to students about how they can improve their writing and analysis prior to inclusion of any necessary text in their final reports. We have also phased out the tick box element of our coursework feedback sheets, so that those marking work now have a greater opportunity to provide more detailed written feedback.

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 that you have spent this year editing exam questions, reading students' work, attending our Examination Board meetings and writing your detailed and helpful report. Your work is much appreciated.

Yours sincerely

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Head of School