

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	Subject(s): GEOGRAPHY
Programme(s) / Module(s): PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHY	awards: (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc.) BSc Geography

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.

There are 3 matters that I should like the school to consider as a matter of urgency before the start of the next academic year.

1. Ensuring that there is minimal overlap between assessments set for continuous assessment project work and unseen examination questions. This can also involve style of assessments that should be different, that is testing different aspects of the student's learning.
2. Geog 3091 Geography of Natural Catastrophes. Learning outcomes are not clear and there is confusion about what is expected of students and how they should approach critical evaluation of learning materials. Evidence from feedback forms demonstrates that students are not given clear guidance about their strengths and weaknesses and so are not able to use feedback to reinforce learning. Evidence from examination answers demonstrated that the distribution of grades from all three parts of the module assessment were different. This suggests either a structural weakness in the teaching or some inappropriate assessment methods. This pattern was anomalous and needs investigation / rectification to avoid student complaint.
3. Geog 2980 The Science of Terrestrial Carbon. The questionnaire feedback from this module was poor with 45 % of students expressing the view that teaching was not of a high quality or not satisfied with quality. Careful scrutiny of the module, however, reveals a picture that is more positive; there are imaginative assessment methods and the curriculum is exciting, relevant to current issues and cutting edge. The problem seems to lie with inconsistencies that have arisen from 6 teachers contributing to the teaching and assessment. This has been a source of confusion with inconsistent feedback and marking. I recommend that the number of teacher is reduced and that marking and feedback is provided in a more consistent manner.

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?

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 BSc degree programme in Physical Geography is a stimulating programme with a curriculum that offers appropriate challenge and elective choice. The Board of Examiners' in Geography manages standards very effectively and, from the examination material scrutinised by the external examiners', it is clear that there is a good correspondence between learning outcomes and degree classes awarded.

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.*

The Physical Geography degree programme is underpinned by a sound curriculum that exposes students to fundamental concepts in the foundation year yet allows pathways that bring the best students to the research frontier in their second and third years of study. The curriculum contains a good mixture of high quality modules that provide intellectual challenge, choice, relevant skills, varied and appropriate assessment methods. Overall, the programme conforms to the National Subject Benchmark in 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 Faculty of Environment recently introduced a Code of Practice on Assessment that helpfully sets out the principles and practice that the School of Geography aim to follow. The guidelines expressly ask module convenors to ensure that Module learning outcomes are assessed in an appropriate manner. In most of the modules that I looked at this year it was clear that assessment methods were tailored appropriately to learning and provided good opportunities for students to demonstrate knowledge and develop relevant transferable skills. The school take particular care over module moderation and there was ample evidence of careful scrutiny of marking standards through cross checking and double marking. The marking standards are, for the most part, robust and applied consistently. Problems were identified and corrected through the rigorous application of procedures set out in the Code of Practice and the School should be commended for good practice.

The School may wish to reflect of the effectiveness of the way they use the percentage mark scheme. At present the scale assumes that individual members of staff mark to a precision of 1% which, for essays and reports that evaluate information and ideas, seems a false level of precision. The school may wish to consider an alternative menu of available marks that span across the degree classes thereby making assessment easier to relate to marking criteria. Students expressed a view that the level of work (effort) required to achieve 70% say, is considerably more than 68%. This implies that some stretching of marks across the grade boundaries may be appropriate. For example it could be that a minimum mark for first class work is set at 75% rather than 70% to reflect and reward excellence. The same principle would need to be applied at the lower end of the mark scale for consistency.

Furthermore, the marking criteria could be extended to cover a wider range of assessment methods. At present, it appeared to me that the same criteria are being applied across quite a diverse set of assessment methods which may not always fit well.

Some minor niggles were identified and should be reported to staff. It should be stressed that in general assessment standards are high.

1. Tick boxes on feedback forms used inconsistently – are these really needed?
2. Some feedback forms not signed
3. Comments sometimes not balanced or divided into strengths AND weaknesses
4. Marks not always explained or related to marking criteria
5. Some forms contained two different grades.
6. Too few comments on some feedback forms

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.*

The external examiners' met with a sample of the student body and independently read module questionnaire returns. In general, a picture emerges of happy students who recognise the quality of the teaching staff and appreciate the fact that they are being taught by enthusiastic people who are research active. Students appreciate that the BSc programme includes a good level of choice and that opportunities are available to develop fieldwork, laboratory, advanced computing skills and even work experience. The standard of the BSc degree from Leeds is in line with the best Departments in the country.

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.

The School responded positively to suggestions made the external examiners' in 2009/10 which led to demonstrable improvements in specific modules identified that year for inconsistent marking.

Strengths: the assessment process revealed the following good practice.

1. Students exposed to cutting edge problems
2. Students able to engage in work with practical, real-world impact e.g environmental pollution; climate change
3. The best students engage with the latest research literature
4. Helpful and enthusiastic staff willing to give time to explain ideas and support student learning

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.

There is evidence of student engagement in research both within elective modules and through independent study in the form of dissertations. Students recognise that the staff are active researchers and respect the integration of research methods and topics in their curriculum.

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.*

The School of Geography provides a clear brief for the external examiners' both in terms of scrutiny of procedures and evaluation of standards of setting and marking student work. Examiners' are provided with assessed work for marginal candidates and modules where moderation, or some other irregularity, has occurred. Examiners are also invited to request additional material which is always, in my experience, been provided willingly.

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.*

In recent years the role of the external examiner has shifted from the "external impartial marker" able to adjudicate in difficult or contentious cases, to a role more akin to an auditor, scrutinising procedure and compliance with policies and guidelines. The latter role is less engaging with the academic subject and in the time available it is difficult to become familiar with the detail of the curriculum and the student experience. Nevertheless, the School of Geography has excellent documentation that outlines principles and practice that makes the job of the external examiner straightforward. Furthermore, the examination officer is well versed in University policy and Departmental practice which also greatly helps the external examiners in their duties.

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 felt that I had sufficient data available to assess marginal candidates and to evaluate the standard of their work in relation to their peers.

A very positive innovation introduced this year was the Module Moderation Form. The form clearly documents the procedure followed by moderators in ensuring that work was graded appropriately. The forms I reviewed clearly

demonstrated that moderation is taken very seriously and the procedures / guidelines applied rigorously. There is clear evidence of good practice here.

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

Not all summative work is assessed anonymously. It would be a minor change to introduce anonymous marking consistently throughout the School. Unseen examinations are assessed anonymously and this year the Board of Examiners' meeting were conducted anonymously and names not revealed until the degree classes were confirmed. This practice is commended and I hope it will continue.

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

The administrative arrangements for handing special circumstances evidence appear sensitive, fair and robust. Students with special circumstances were treated with due care and attention at the final Board of Examiners' meeting.

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.

Although not a formal mentoring arrangement, I should like to acknowledge the support I received from <<<>> from <<<>> University who is the BA External examiner. <<> gave generously of <<> time to help introduce me to Leeds examination process and gave excellent advice when needed.

Other Comments

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

The School of Geography responded positively to external examiner comments from 2009/10. The Head of Department <<<>> wrote a considered response to the reports from both the Human and Physical Geography external examiners and followed up on <<> comments with positive actions to improve standards and practices. I commend the School on their examinations team led by <<<>>; the whole team are professional, helpful and clearly very effective. The overall impression of the school is one of a positive learning and teaching environment with high quality staff and students.

School of Geography
University of Leeds
Leeds LS2 9JT



18 October 2011

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

Dear

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

We were extremely pleased to see that you felt our programme to be "stimulating...offering appropriate challenge...and choice", and that our standards continue to be in line with National Subject Benchmark in Geography. 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 the recent amendments to our moderating procedure, put in place by our Examinations Officer, are deemed to be a "very positive innovation".

Your report mentions three matters that the School should review with some urgency:

- (1) Ensuring minimal overlap between coursework and examinations;
- (2) Issues surrounding GEOG3091 Geography of Natural Catastrophes;
- (3) Issues surrounding GEOG2980 The Science of Terrestrial Carbon

Concerning the first point, this problem appears to be confined to a small number of modules and our internal moderation procedures have highlighted such cases. Clearly, we need to address these matters prior to the forthcoming academic year and so our Examinations Officer has already begun the task of collating all significant pieces of continuous assessment for Level 3 modules running in Semester 1 of the 2011/12 session. Our intention is to review internally the continuous assessment work being given to students. This aim of this exercise is to: (i) ensure that the expectations of students studying all modules at this level of study are equal as far as possible, and; (ii) make certain that the overlap issue is avoided by comparing with examination questions reviewed later in the semester. For Level 2 modules we will be embarking on a major review of our curriculum this year so the intention at present is to request continuous assessment details only from modules that have previously been flagged as potentially problematic, in lieu of a more thorough review in the 2012/13 session of study.

In light of the issues arising with the two modules (GEOG3091, 2980) that were convened and delivered predominantly by <<<>>, I can tell you that we have taken action in an attempt to ensure the problems seen this year will not be repeated. The GEOG3091 Catastrophes module has been cancelled and will no longer run as part of our curriculum. Additionally, the GEOG2980 teaching team will now be comprised of just two staff <<<>>. Parts of the content and delivery mechanisms have been revised, and for the 2011/12 session the module will be monitored closely by the BSc programme manager <<<>> in an attempt to ensure better quality teaching, assessment and feedback to students.

In response to some of your additional minor comments, I am happy to explain that we have begun the process of revamping our module feedback forms in light of the issues you raised. As part of this we will explore ways of ensuring that student submissions are consistently anonymised during the marking process. We anticipate that a new system will be ready for implementation by the start of semester 2. Our Learning and Teaching Committee will be considering the development of new advice to staff about how best to interpret the University marking scheme to avoid “false levels of precision” and to test whether the concerns communicated to you by students, that the level of effort required to reach a mark of 70 is substantially more than needed to gain a 68, are indeed valid. We will also be looking into ways to construct specific guidance on the use of marking schemes that is more suited to non-essay type continuous assessments.

I very much hope that this 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 time that you spent reading our students’ work, attending our Examination Board meeting and writing your detailed and helpful report. We look forward to seeing you once more next year.

Yours sincerely

Head of School

Professor of Human Geography
Head of School