

The University of Leeds

EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2012– 2013

Part A: General Information

Subject area and awards being examined

Faculty / School of:	GEOGRAPHY
Subject(s):	<i>Physical Geography</i>
Programme(s) / Module(s):	
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	BSc

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 no matters that require urgent attention.

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?

NA

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

Over my four year period of appointment I am pleased to report that:

1. National Student Survey overall satisfaction results have increased year-on-year suggesting that initiatives designed to improve student experience are working and that students are, for the most part, very satisfied with the level and standard of education provided on the BSc Geography programme;
2. There were problems first identified with two physical geography modules in 2010-11 and I am able to confirm that these were rectified and no similar issue have arisen in the past two years;
3. The new Physical Geography curriculum, now rolled out to L2 students, incorporates many improvements that seem to be well received by students and which maps better with the research strengths of the school thereby reinforcing the strong links between research and education at Leeds;
4. The BSc Tutorials mapping guide looks like a very helpful innovation to guide staff and students through the tutorial system; I am told that a similar guide exists for assessments which will help ensure that deadlines don't conflict and that student expectations for feedback are realistic and carefully managed;
5. In terms of module evaluation questionnaires and NSS in particular, assessment and feedback remain the Achilles heel of the school (63% satisfaction). However, an upward trend from previous years and evidence from the examinations process suggest that staff are conscious of the importance of feedback and are diligent; in almost all cases students receive timely feedback that contains detailed comments designed to

help students improve. The school needs to maintain its efforts to drive up standards and to ensure that module evaluation questionnaires are completed and feedback acted upon appropriately;

6. The School's NSS Action Plan incorporates many good ideas that should help to improve student experience and simplify the expectations of staff. For example, the embedding of dissertation advisors within the new tutorial system seems sensible and efficient, as does the introduction of "feedback tutorials" at the start of semester 2.

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 programme continues to develop in a very positive manner. Student feedback on the new L2 seems good and the move to 20 credit modules crossing semesters appears to have worked well. Students are pleased with the Learning Outcomes and aware that they are getting good academic training and relevant skills to equip them to compete in the job market. There is clear evidence of academic progression through the three years of the undergraduate programme. The emphasis on subject specific skills at level 2 with the "Skills for Physical Geographers" – 40 credit module is most welcome and should feed forward to elective modules at L2 and L3 and the Dissertation.

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 BSc programme is fully aligned with the National subject benchmark statement for Geography. There is a good balance between subject specific learning outcomes and subject and generic skills.

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 new curriculum embraces a broader range of assessment methods than previously and students are aware of the value to them of such diversification. They are concerned about how well they are prepared to tackle new assessment methods, and so greatly appreciate when staff provide clear guidance and formative feedback. Ideas for students on how to improve feedback include assessment workshops and marking guidelines that are specific to the task.

The summative feedback forms that were scrutinised seem improved on the previous three years - there is greater consistency, there is a good amount of feedback and there is a better level of legibility in written comments.

The dissertation module, being double blind marked, requires a robust process for resolving differences between markers. For the BSc programme, this seems not to have worked as well this year as in previous years with nearly 70% of cases with significant differences resulting in a lower than the average mark being adopted. There is a strong recommendation to revise the process for moderation and to ensure broad alignment of marking standards with the BA programme (see also Q7 below).

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 summative assessments give a good indication that the BSc programme at Leeds is appropriately challenging and that the academic standards are compatible with the best Geography BSc programmes in the country.

The external examiners met with a group of 7 students including 2 BSc L2 students and this helped to confirm that the BSc is stimulating, challenging and that staff are highly motivated and enthusiastic about their subjects and knowledge exchange. As with every large cohort, there is a range of abilities; at the top end there is excellent first class work, at the 2i level there is a good range of first class and solid 2i performance, at 2ii there are fewer students but it is clear that standards are still appropriate. It is notable that there is a only a very small tail to the distribution of degree class outcomes.

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

NA

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 nature and effectiveness of enhancements to the programme and modules since previous year. The new L1 and L2 curricula seem to be working well and are popular with staff and students alike. The students are being inducted into these programmes in each year and have a clear idea of ILOs, and how these are delivered through core and elective modules. They are also aware of the importance of academic and generic skills and how these can impact positively on their employability.

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.

Students appreciate the research-led flavour of the education at Leeds and clearly are aware that the quality of both research and teaching in the School is very high. The School have produced a map of the new L2 and L3 BSc programmes to help students identify logical pathways to guide students through the elective options. The mapping document is loosely related to the research clusters within the school but it also helps identify opportunities for attaining key skills and work experience. The intention to form an Industrial Advisory Board to advise the School about employers' requirements is an exciting and welcome development and certainly, if implemented represents good practice in addressing University objectives for enhancing student employability.

It is worth noting that a significant number of some BSc dissertations were of a very high standard and that the School were recognising that these should be submitted for national competitions or in exceptional cases developed further into peer review articles. Again this represents excellent practice and should be strongly encouraged.

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

Leeds employ two external examiners for their undergraduate degree programmes, one for Physical geography and the other for human geography. The terms of appointments are staggered and so there is a helpful period when support and mentoring is available to new examiners and this courtesy is returned the following year. I am pleased to say that this system worked very well for me, and although not a formal process, in my view this constitutes good practice.

The Examination/Assessment Process

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.*

Leeds School of Geography provides clear guidelines and externals are given all the support needed to complete their task in a welcoming, positive, open and transparent manner.

- 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.*

The School made available all the appropriate documentation and data very efficiently and willingly both in advance in the form of handbooks and during the visit to Leeds.

- 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?**

I confirm that all draft examination papers for the BSc programme were sent to me for comment. In almost all cases the question papers were drafted to a high standard with questions that were appropriately chosen and suitably challenging.

- 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?**

The School made available a good range of student work for external scrutiny including marginal candidates. I confirm that further work was requested and it was provided promptly and willingly. As far as I could judge there is a good amount of feedback in the form of written comments on student work and there is a better level of legibility in written comments than in previous years.

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

The choice of dissertation topics in the sample that I saw seemed entirely appropriate, mapping as expected with the research interests of staff within the school. Last year I commented favourably on the double blind marking procedures and the proforma that is used to track the moderation process. This year I was concerned that BSc dissertations overall, had a mean grade three percentage points lower than the BA equivalent. An investigation of the grades, and working through the impact of possible differences in marking standards, revealed that the differences impacted only a very few students whose work was then scrutinised carefully. Nevertheless, both the BA external examiner <> and I would like the School to review its procedures for dissertation mark moderation and to pay close attention to harmonising the process between the BA and BSc programmes.

- 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?**

From start to finish the administrative arrangements have been excellent. Information has been sent to me in good time and arrangement agreed at an early stage. The organisation and conduct of exam board has been efficient, effective and carried through with the utmost professionalism. Where appropriate, I have been fully involved in the business of Board of Examiners and am fully satisfied with the recommendations of the Final Board meeting which I attended.

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

All the evidence points to a well organised set of processes and procedures for dealing with mitigating circumstances. All such circumstances were brought to the attention of the external examiners and were handled sensitively.

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

Overall the external impression of the school is as a vibrant and lively place to work and study. Students are provided with a positive learning environment with high quality research active staff who take an interest in student welfare and development. In return, the students appear to respond well and are enthusiastic and appreciative of what the school delivers for them.

The Head of School <> and all staff involved in assessment have been most helpful and professional throughout. The exams officer <> and <> team deserve special mention for their utmost efficiency and professionalism.

School of Geography
University of Leeds
Leeds LS2 9JT



28 August 2013

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

Dear

I am writing to express my sincere thanks for your detailed and thorough evaluation of our BSc programmes over the last four years. We are particularly grateful for your insightful comments and guidance, in particular your bi-annual inputs towards maintaining our examination question standards, inputs to our revised curriculum, reading and assessing the many pieces of student work that have come your way, and not least your helpful suggestions on individual pieces of work (and sometimes modules!) where there were either problems or conflicting opinions on grades.

I am very pleased that your report raises no major issues again this year, although I would reiterate the statement made by my predecessors that we do not intend to become complacent given the changing nature of higher education and our ongoing curriculum changes. Please accept my assurances that we will address the few minor points that you raise in your report – your successor can verify this next year!

I would like to express particular thanks for your detailed work this summer with regards to identifying some potential issues with the moderation process for BSc dissertations. Your identification of the issue, suggestions for remedial action, and detailed scrutiny of all final classifications that may have been affected was thorough and, on the positive side, seemed to be an extremely useful learning exercise for several colleagues in the School. You can be assured that the Director of Student Education and dissertation module leaders will be paying close attention to the marks in the coming academic year, and reminding colleagues of the importance of conducting a thorough moderation process in an attempt to avoid a repeat of this year's mark discrepancies.

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 are all very grateful for, and appreciative of, your professionalism and your support for the School of Geography at Leeds.

Yours sincerely

Head of School