

The University of Leeds
EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT
ACADEMIC YEAR: 2011– 2012

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 were 3 matters that I asked the school to consider as a matter of urgency in 2011.

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.* I am pleased to report that I have not seen this problem repeated this year and the School are to be congratulated for taking appropriate action and scrutinising the examination papers and continuously assessed work carefully.
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.* The School did not offer the module this academic year and I note there are more robust procedures to pick up on structural weaknesses in module delivery. In particular, I am pleased to see the improvements to the format and the analysis of the Module Evaluation Questionnaires.
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.* Module evaluation scores show improvement but do still do not meet the Universities "gold standard" of 80% satisfaction; more work is needed to ensure that module evaluations meet the School's and the University's Expectations.

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?

Not applicable

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

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. The programme learning outcomes encourage students to engage with personal development and enhancing skills to promote their employability; I am pleased to note that module learning outcomes do address these issues, particularly through *Leeds for Life* but also through a *placement elective module* and also through skills embedded within more traditional academic 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.*

The Physical Geography degree programme is currently undergoing review and refresh: 2011/12 saw a new first year delivered to expose students to fundamental concepts in Physical Geography. The School plans to roll out a new second year curriculum in 2012/13 and so on to enhance delivery of research-led education and key skills in all years of study. As it stands I am pleased to confirm that the curriculum contains a good mixture of high quality modules that provide intellectual challenge, choice, relevant skills that 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 Code of Practice on Assessment, introduced in 2011/12 helpfully sets out the principles and practice that the School of Geography follow. The guidelines expressly ask module convenors to ensure that Module learning outcomes are assessed in an appropriate manner. In all of the modules 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 sample double marking. I note that the Dissertation (40 credit) module is double blind marked and moderated which represents good practice. The moderation proforma is particularly helpful as it incorporates evidence on double marking, moderation, peer evaluation and module questionnaire feedback – both quantitative and qualitative; this provides excellent oversight and is an demonstrates very good practice as a tool for quality assurance. I confirm that marking standards were robust and evaluation criteria were applied consistently. Where problems were identified, there was a rigorous application of procedures for moderation as set out in the Code of Practice and the School should be commended for good practice in this regard.

Last year I asked the School 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 / University 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. Following on from comments made by students in 2010/11, an albeit small sample of third year students in 2011/12, expressed a consistent 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 72% 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.

The marking criteria published in programme handbooks could be extended to cover a wider range of assessment methods. At present, it appears that the same criteria are being applied across quite a diverse set of assessment methods which may not always fit well.

It should be stressed that in general assessment standards are high, although teaching staff should avoid complacency and note that:

1. Tick boxes on feedback forms used inconsistently – are these really needed
2. Comments sometimes not balanced or divided into strengths AND weaknesses
3. Marks not always explained or related to marking criteria
4. Too few comments on some feedback forms; problems of legibility of markers comments

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 small sample of the student body and independently read module evaluation 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 on the BSc programme particularly value opportunities for field-based learning noting that field classes bring out the best in both staff and students. The BSc programme includes a good level of choice and opportunities are available to develop fieldwork, laboratory, advanced computing skills and work experience. The standard of the BSc degree programme at 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 many of the suggestions made the external examiners' in 2010/11 which led to demonstrable improvements in, and the dropping of, specific modules.

Strengths: the assessment process revealed the following good practice.

1. Students exposed to and participating in current research topics
2. Students able to engage in work with practical, real-world problems e.g. environmental change; pollution; pollution
3. Engagement with peer-review research literature
4. Helpful and enthusiastic staff willing to give time to explain ideas and support student learning

Other areas of good practice were reported in sections 3 and 4 – module evaluation questionnaires and good quality field-based teaching.

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 that student are aware of the value of research-led education and are able to articulate examples of how this is delivered 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, particularly through field-based learning.

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.*

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 <<>> and his team are 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. I was able to request to look at additional candidates and at specific modules, perhaps where module evaluation scores gave reason for further scrutiny.

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

I am pleased to report that this year ALL summative work was assessed anonymously. This is excellent and provides consistency of procedure throughout the School. Names are now only revealed after the degree classes are confirmed at the final Board of Examiners meeting. 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 and anonymity 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 benefits of working in partnership with the BA External examiner <<>> It is extremely helpful to work in a mutually supportive manner which helps to introduce new examiners to the Leeds examination process.

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 and quickly 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 her comments with positive actions to improve standards and practices. I particularly 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
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18 July 2012

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 again this year. As I have said previously, the School very much welcomes your informed external perspective on the quality and philosophy of our courses, and we are very grateful for your support.

I am extremely pleased to see that you consider the numerous changes we have implemented over the last academic year have been successful, especially those that were made in response to the three areas of concern that you highlighted. As per previous years, it is pleasing to hear that the self-selecting group of students were positive about the staff and teaching in the School.

It is very gratifying that your report raises no major issues this year, although I am happy to say that we do not intend to become complacent given the changing nature of higher education and our ongoing curriculum changes. You suggest that the School should continue to review the issues leading to relatively low feedback scores for GEOG2980 *The Science of Terrestrial Carbon*. This module has now been discontinued as a consequence of our ongoing curriculum review; nevertheless, the two convenors of this module will be monitored closely in relation to their new teaching commitments both by our incoming Director of Taught Student Education, and colleagues who will be members of module specific teaching teams with them. Through these mechanisms we hope to improve and maintain the quality of the student experience across the BSc programme (and indeed the School).

With respect to some of your minor comments, 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 those 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. Our incoming Director of Taught Student Education will also be tasked with reviewing the effectiveness of the way we use the mark scheme as I appreciate this is something you have commented on previously but we have so far not addressed. The University has recently reaffirmed its commitment to the 20-90 mark scale as a means of promoting common practice across the institution as a whole. Any local innovations will thus have to work within this framework, but we feel confident that there are positive changes we can explore and discuss with you next summer.

As you also point out, in a small number of cases we have some issues with poor quality and illegibility of feedback provided on scripts and feedback sheets by individual members of staff. Our intention is to make an initial review of feedback provided to a sample of students over the last year, and then discuss the need for improvement with individual members of staff as appropriate. Thereafter we will incorporate a new component into our module moderation form, asking for the module reviewer to comment explicitly on the quality and quantity of feedback provided to students. We anticipate that this will provide us with a more formal record of any ongoing problems whilst allowing staff to share examples of good practice through our quality control procedure.

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. Although, I am leaving the University of Leeds during the summer vacation, my colleagues look forward to working with you once more next year, and 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