

The University of Leeds

EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2013– 2014

Part A: General Information

Subject area and awards being examined

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

Name and home Institution / affiliation of Examiner

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 Quality Assurance**
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?

Yes. The School were also very open in discussing issues raised by previous external examiners. There is clear evidence of an open and responsive system to deal with External Examiners' comments and suggestions.

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

N/A

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 programme aims and ILOs are certainly appropriate for the level 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.*

The programme and the associated ILOs are consistent with the national subject benchmark (QAA 2007). This is the first year a cohort has completed the new BSc curriculum, which offers a good balance between subject specific learning, discipline-specific skills and more generic skills. The curriculum has been carefully designed and is well integrated. There is clear progression through the degree, and an appropriately portfolio of interesting and challenging courses.

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.*

I looked at several courses in detail, and found the assessment methods carefully designed around the individual course ILOs. More widely, there is evidence of careful balancing of assessment against programme ILOs, particularly in relation to the core elements of the degree (tutorials and data analysis elements at L1, Skills for Physical Geographers module at L2, Dissertation at L3).

The range of assessment types is impressive, and there were some very good examples of innovative coursework and mixes of assessment types within modules.

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.*

See comments in box 3. The range of assessment types, and the balancing of these against ILOs, provides clear opportunity for students to demonstrate their achievement against both programme aims and individual ILOs.

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. 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.

As a first year external examiner it is difficult at this stage to trace year-on-year enhancements. However, this is the first year that the new BSc curriculum has operated in all three years of the programme, and the third year offering is therefore effectively new. The move to consolidate 20 credit modules is consistent with practice at other institutions, and offers scope for students to engage more deeply with the courses in their final year. The range of courses offered is appropriate, covering all the key areas of physical geography you would expect to see. Some additional comments on the new third year courses are provided at the end of this form.

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.

As you would expect from a research led institution, the curriculum is strongly influenced by the research strengths of the department and student research is embedded within the curriculum through the second year 'Skills for Physical Geographers' course', the dissertation and through fieldwork experiences with a significant research element. There is clear evidence of students being exposed to the School's research within the third year modules I took a closer look at ('Water Science and Management' and 'Digital Worlds').

8. Where the programme forms part of an Integrated PhD, please comment on the appropriateness of the programme as training for a PhD

N/A

For Examiners involved in mentoring arrangements

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

This was my first year as external examiner at Leeds, although I have acted as external examiner at several other institutions. _____ was the co-examiner (BA degree) and had already completed two years as examiner here _____ therefore acted as my informal mentor for the Leeds system. This informal system worked extremely effectively in helping me get up to speed with the Leeds system.

The Examination/Assessment Process

10. 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 information provided by both the University and School on my role, powers and responsibilities was clear and accessible.

11. 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

12. 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 was provided with draft examination papers for comment in a timely and organised manner, and there is clear evidence that my comments on these were considered and acted on where appropriate. I found the nature and level of examination questions appropriate, and my comments were predominantly matters of detail.

In common with other many other departments I am familiar with, arrangements for external scrutiny or approval of coursework assignments are less well defined. Coursework titles and associated materials were not sent out to me for prior approval or comment, but I appreciate the difficulty of this given timing of courses between the two semester, the complexity of some coursework assignments (data responses etc), the sheer volume of material often associated with coursework assignments and the need to define the coursework very early in the organisation of a course (much earlier usually than exam questions). Coursework does not therefore lend itself well to 'prior approval' by external examiners. However, given that assessment for many of the courses (particularly at level 3) is dominated by coursework consideration needs to be given to a system for external scrutiny and approval of coursework for new modules or where significant changes are proposed to existing coursework arrangements on a module.

13. 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 provided full access to assessed and examined work, both coursework and examination scripts. The exam scripts I saw were generally clearly marked and annotated and provided confidence in the evaluation of the standard of student work.

I make further comments on coursework comments and feedback the end of this report.

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

There was a very good range of subjects for dissertations, and these mapped appropriately on to both the module offerings through the degree and the established research strengths of the School. Dissertations seem relatively short and well-focused (compared to those I have seen at other institutions) and present as focused papers. This is an example of good practice, as the stronger dissertations present clear evidence of understanding of the research process and a critical perspective, whilst being accessible and focused.

The commentaries justifying dissertation marks varied within the subsample of dissertations I looked at. The majority of comments were clear and well justified, relating clearly to the dissertation marking criteria. However, I also saw examples of less well justified commentaries, including: overemphasis on matters of detail to the exclusion of clearer cross-referencing to the published marking criteria; suggestions that analysis of secondary data alone is not sufficient for a first class

mark (which if policy has implications for modelling-based dissertations); some very short commentaries (<100 words) to justify marks. I recommend that staff are reminded of the published dissertation criteria at the time of marking. A simple solution to this is to include the criteria on the dissertation marking form.

I comment on the spread of marks for dissertations at the end of this report.

15. 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?

The administrative arrangements throughout the process were excellent. Communications with the examination team were clear throughout the year. I was given a thorough briefing at the beginning of my visit to Leeds, and both academic and support staff were constantly available to answer questions and support my work in the School. The operation of the Board of Examiners was organised and professional, and I was satisfied with the Board's recommendation.

I commend the School on the efficient administration of their examinations system.

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

Yes.

Other comments

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

Given the generally specific nature of the questions above, I have chosen to provide here a summary of my key comments and observations, plus detail on matters for consideration by the Board of Examiners.

- 1. I commend the School on the excellent organisation of the examination system.** There is clearly a very strong team, and management and administration of examinations and assessments is undertaken with care and attention to detail, using strong and clear procedures.
- 2. I was impressed with the transparency of the examination process to the external examiners.** In particular we were provided with a very full set of statistics for degree and module performance, including longitudinal data that provided a wider context to some of the discussions the School are having about examination processes and marks. I note that the trends in degree performance observed in the School over the last 10 years are consistent with other Geography departments. Module moderation forms, incorporating student feedback, are excellent and an example of good practice. My requests for information, specific scripts, further details of processes etc during my visit were all met rapidly and efficiently. There is clear evidence that the School is responsive to external examiners' comments. Issues raised in last year's external examiners reports had been considered and acted on where appropriate. During my visit there was a good critical dialogue evident over curriculum and assessment matters, and importantly no sense of complacency.
- 3. The new curriculum for BSc Geography is appropriate and working well.** This was the first year a full cohort had passed through the new curriculum, and I was specifically asked for my observations on the third year elements. The third year modules provide an excellent and appropriate mix of subject matter, are appropriately challenging, and contain a good variety and carefully thought through range of assessment types. The student group we met during our visit were enthusiastic about the range of modules and the breadth of assessment types, and praised emphasis on developing 'real world skills'

within the assessments of some of the courses. They were also extremely positive about the employability activities within the curriculum and the wider Leeds system, such as support for placements and volunteering, the Year 2 careers module and the careers talks from former Leeds graduates.

4. Although the third year offer appears strong, this is the first year of delivery and therefore **the assessment arrangements across the third year modules should continue to be reviewed by the examination team.** In particular, some of the new third year 20 credit modules are effectively combinations of previous 10 credit modules, and some concerns were raised over whether the assessments (and marks available) on these modules were balanced between the different elements of the new modules and whether the quantity of assessment was equivalent across the Year 3 modules.
5. I note some tendency to restrict the range of marks awarded to students. This was evident in marks for the subsample of dissertations I inspected. I would have awarded the very best dissertations higher marks than the markers, and at the bottom end I saw some work marked mid-3rd class which I would have given a much lower mark to. I also felt that the preponderance of coursework assessments in Year 3 was possibly leading to 'reversion to the mean', and not allowing the very best students to be rewarded with very high marks. These issues are by no means unique to Leeds, but **I recommend that staff are encouraged to use the full mark range, particularly in dissertation and coursework marking.**
6. I note that the manner in which feedback is returned to students (e.g. coursework feedback) is inconsistent between modules, some being by paper forms (of varying types and with varying detail of comment), some electronically, and some using the gradebook facility of BlackBoard. There is a standard School 'feedback form', but the format of this does not always encourage explanation of marks around assessment criteria. NSS data suggests feedback is an issue to the students at Leeds, and this was reinforced in the meeting the external examiners had with a group of students. The challenge is to provide sufficient, useful feedback to students in a form they will access and effectively digest. The students reported mixed experiences with coursework feedback, some excellent but some more problematic. They reported being confused by the different set of arrangements for feedback between different modules. They commented that hand written feedback could be hard to read. There was a clear feeling amongst this set of students that online feedback was more effective and appreciated. **I recommend the Board of Examiners review the current 'mixed economy' of coursework feedback procedures and encourage much fuller use of the online gradebook feedback system within BlackBoard.**

17th October 2014

Dear

Head of School response to the BSc External Examiner's Report

I am writing to express my gratitude for your work as external examiner on our BSc programmes this year. The School very much appreciates the role you play in ensuring that we deliver a high quality education in Physical Geography.

Your detailed report is very positive about upon our standards, processes and curriculum, and in particular we are pleased to hear the favourable report on level three, which ran in its new form for the first time, and upon which your appraisal primarily focussed.

Whilst you identified no matters for urgent attention, you highlighted some issues for us to consider to further enhance our processes and practice, specifically:

- a) Facilitate external examiner scrutiny of coursework assignments for any new modules, or where there are significant changes proposed to existing coursework arrangements (p6, 12);
- b) Review assessment at Level 3 with respect to the quantity and balance of assessment for 20 credit modules previously offered as 2 x 10 credit modules (p8,4);
- c) Make greater use of the full mark range, particularly in dissertation and other coursework marking (p8, 5);
- d) Tackle a minority of cases where dissertation feedback is limited/unclear and so marks inadequately justified - you identify examples of poor cross-reference to marking criteria, very short commentaries, and a suggestion that secondary data analysis is inadequate for a first class mark (I can confirm this is not school policy) (p6, 14);
- e) Review the mixed provision of coursework feedback, and encourage greater use of online feedback (p8, 6).

Your recommendations have already been raised at our School Taught Student Education Committee (STSEC) with a view to implementing improved practice as soon as we can. For item (a), we are happy to provide information on any substantially altered or new coursework assessment on an on-going basis, and with regard to item (b), we do use clear assessment norms for each level, though with a small amount of flexibility depending on types of assessment. We continue to review balance, timing and weighting of assessment on modules as the new curriculum 'beds in', and will keep an eye on this issue. Item (c) has recently been discussed at a BSc teaching meeting and all staff have been encouraged to reward work of excellence (in particular) with marks at the very top of the scale. This should see our overall marks profile raised to ensure i) we award an increased number of 1st-class degrees at L3 (which historically have been low), and ii) we give L1 students adequate opportunity to participate in the Year Abroad schemes, which require a L1 portfolio > 60% for eligibility.

We will be discussing item (d) with dissertation supervisors in advance of the next round of submissions in March, and item (e) is being partly addressed through an on-line marking pilot scheme being run in the two tutorial modules, GEOG1070 and GOG2095. Our aim is to roll this out to other modules once staff have become familiar with the procedures on these two pilot modules.

Thank you again for your endeavours on our behalf. We look forward to working with you again over the next academic year.

Yours sincerely

Head of School