

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:

Design

Subject(s):

Graphic and Communication Design

Programme(s) / Module(s):

Level 1
1250 Fundamentals of Imaging
1414 Introduction to Photography
1415 Introduction to Photography
1989 Graphic and Communication Media
1999 Communication & Design Process

Level 2
2255 Digital Design for Professional Development
2415 Photography (Digital) Demon
2730 Principles of Typography
2980 Design Application
2897 Digital Media (Web) 2A
2988 Digital Media (Motion/Interactive) 2B
2989 Graphic and Communication Media B

Level 3
3150 Contemporary Moving Image
3720 Contemporary Typography
3725 Information Design
3760 Advertising and Brand Communication
3989 Graphic and Communication Media C
3994 Independent Project
3460 Independent Study: Minor Dissertation
3660 Independent Study Dissertation

Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):

BA(Hons)

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

I have not received the response of the School to previous External Examiner reports, as indicated below. Similarly, a formal response has not been provided to my first report for the 2011-12 academic year. This is not a matter that should delay the programme being offered again, but is an aspect of procedure that needs addressing now as a matter of urgency.

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.

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.*

In my previous report I suggested the Programme Aims would benefit from being rewritten to read as a series of key succinct statements. This remains the case and I encourage those contributing to the programme's various modules to come together and review this. This is a considerable undertaking and may require discussion School wide. Some helpful guidance can be found in the following references (and elsewhere):

Davies, A. **Writing Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria in Art and Design**
www.adm.heacademy.ac.uk/library/.../writinglearningoutcomes.pdf

Davies, A. **Learning outcomes and assessment criteria in art and design. What's the recurring problem?** Networks 18, July 2012
<http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/projects/networks/issue-18-july-2012/learning-outcomes-and-assessment-criteria-in-art-and-design.-whats-the-recurring-problem>

Subject benchmark statement: Art and design
<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Subject-benchmark-statement---Art-and-design-.aspx>

A Framework for Qualifications of The European Higher Education Area
http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050218_QF_EHEA.pdf

The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland
<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/The-framework-for-higher-education-qualifications-in-England-Wales-and-Northern-Ireland.aspx>

SEEC level descriptors
<http://www.seec.org.uk/academic-credit/seec-credit-level-descriptors-2010>

How to link outcomes to assessment
<http://www.ssdd.bcu.ac.uk/outcomes/>

I will not repeat here comments made in my previous report about what should be more explicit in the programme aims, but hold these observations as still being in need of consideration.

The previous report also requested clarification about the location of Programme Learning Outcomes (as suggested in the 'Code of Practice on Assessment 2011-12, p. 6). This has not yet been provided and is requested again.

No response has been provided to the inconsistent use of terminology between modules, such as 'learning outcomes' (e.g. DESN1250) and 'objectives' (e.g. DESN1415). A review of this remains highly desirable.

Last year I suggested that "Standards are appropriate for the award but the programme aims could be more detailed and module intended learning outcomes could be more consistently written and coherent in relation to the programme aims". On reflection, and with respect to increased public scrutiny (e.g. National Student Survey), the University is advised that programme paperwork is not of a good standard and the institution might be vulnerable to external criticism that could ultimately lead to reputation damage.

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.*

Please refer to my comments in the 2011-12 report: I have not been made aware if these have yet

been considered or acted on.

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.*

As noted in my previous report, the design and structure of assessment methods, in terms of variety, appears to be a strong aspect of the programme. Most modules have at least two assessed components (e.g. DESN 2415 Digital Photography), some as many as four (e.g. DESN 3725 Information Design).

Based on the limited sample of material provided during the summer visit, less clear is the level of consistency to which assessment methods are applied, and how this functions as an holistic learning experience for students. For example, the marking process for DESN3725 consists of four assessment criteria matrices, one for each of the four assessed components and each receiving a grade recommendation as well as a paragraph of text. This is complex in that it is unclear how each set of assessment criteria relates to the module intended learning outcomes (though it is clear how criterion relate to each assignment). Taken as an example of what is happening in other modules, the link that should be clear – between module learning outcomes and assessment methods – needs to be better evidenced. Only grade recommendations were made available for other modules and as such I request more consistency in the presentation of material at future visits.

In order to achieve a balanced perspective on this, further to the request I made in my last report for ‘sample packs’ of module documentation, I will appreciate for my next visit in 2013-14 documentation for each module being made available as a set, to include:

- Module specification
- Project briefs (as applicable)
- List of dissertation topics (as applicable)
- Negotiated project submissions (as applicable)
- Sample of student work, one from each mark band
- Full set of grades for cohort including double and negotiated marks (as applicable)
- Written feedback to match the above sample

The mid-year visit in February provided a more comprehensive set of paperwork, but the summer visit did not match this. Although the summer visit provided the welcome opportunity to visit the private view, clearly this put the staff team under considerable pressure to prepare for the external examiner’s visit at a time of year when there is much happening. Hopefully, discussion during the most recent visit about how future visits will be coordinated will ease this pressure. That said, access to the degree show private view added much to understanding the culture of the programme, but coinciding with open day preparation seemed to place staff under stress.

Last year I commented on the use of terminology used in assessment criteria, specifically relating to the use of words such as ‘superb’. I am yet to receive a response to whether this is something that may be a cause for concern. Further issues that need addressing as noted in the previous report include:

- The inconsistency of terms used in ‘methods of assessment’.
- The variety of verbs used across module intended learning outcomes.
- The inconsistent and insufficient information about assessment methods
- The alignment between intended learning outcomes and assessment methods (a major concern)

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.*

This is a difficult question to answer given the content of remarks made above. The 'Aims and ILOs' in relation to the academic standards achieved by students, as judged by assessment criteria, needs to be aligned in a way that also makes examining the process more legible. At the moment the presentation of material is uncoordinated and I am therefore restricted in the observations I can make. That said, on the surface the work is of comparable standard to other courses I am and have been exposed to. From a limited perspective, I found the grading commensurate and fair, though I would like to see in the written feedback to students how and why marking tutors reach their grade recommendation. By this I mean does written feedback explain why a grade is not higher or lower (i.e. from the student perspective, what has and has not been achieved and how this may be remedied).

By comparison to the previous year, there is more variety and some excellent typographic detailing. The work demonstrates that students have a better understanding of how to develop ideas, as well as craft outcomes, both something that employers are keen to see evidenced. It is also encouraging to witness more enthusiasm for participating in an exhibition of work in Leeds and in London. Staff deserve credit for this. If there is a weakness I suggest this to be specialist illustration input, particularly centred around drawing (arguably the 'graphic' in graphic and communication design). Other key aspects of the subject seem well covered, such as typography, photography, moving image, infographics and branding.

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 ability to comment here is limited and based on conversations had during my visit. However, I am encouraged by the forthcoming introduction at year two of a 'methodology module'. This will partially address the concerns I raised about how students are prepared for undertaking the *Independent Study Dissertation* module. If not already being taken into consideration, those responsible for developing the content for this new module might wish to consider the work undertaken by Geographer Gillian Rose on *Visual Methodologies*, as well as Bestley and Noble's work on *Visual Research*. In particular, qualitative research that demonstrates both 'extant' and 'research-driven visual data' – as discussed in Alan Bryman's *Social Research Methods* – will enhance the research potential of students in the School of Design, as well as present opportunities for a broader range of staff to help deliver the module. This may further encourage diversity and impact in the *Independent Study Dissertation* module.

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 stated above, the 'research methodology' module is a welcome initiative. This presents not only the opportunity for the School to benefit from the University's research-led teaching, but also

embrace and develop much needed research methods for design related subjects. *Visual methodologies* has already been mentioned but some work may also need to be done in making traditional research methods applicable to the nature of projects undertaken by 'design' students. For example, in addition to photography, drawing is increasingly recognised as an interdisciplinary research-driven method for documentation and elicitation.

During the mid-year visit year two students commented that they would like more guidance on how to use sketchbooks. This may be a symptom of whether students have or have not undertaken an art and design foundation programme before their degree course, but there is a need for students to understand sketchbook work as a non-traditional research method. This should therefore be carefully linked between written and practical outcomes within and across modules. The point was also reinforced by year three students who similarly noted confusion about sketch books as research and development tools. Recently a number of publications introduce the topic of sketchbook work and students should be encouraged to explore and evaluate what they discover about sketchbook use.

It is worth noting that disciplines such those in the Social Sciences have further developed traditional methods such as Grounded Theory into more useful approaches (for example, Derek Layder's work on Adaptive Theory, or Sarah Pink's ideas on Visual Ethnography). These approaches, amongst others are applicable for practical, historical, critical and theoretical design research that may include scientific models as well as those for the arts and humanities.

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

Not applicable.

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.*

I have noted omissions above, and have not been discouraged to request further information. Please note my requests above about the preparation of paper work for future visits.

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 look forward to consultation about the development of the new 'research methodology' module?

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 was provided with the necessary paperwork before the visit for the dissertation module. However, where there are additional written components in other modules, it will be helpful if these are also provided in advance, perhaps via email. Please continue to send all dissertation samples on a disk in advance as this is very helpful.

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?

There was a sufficient amount of work made available prior and during the summer visit. However, as noted above, there is too much inconsistency in the availability of paperwork evidenced during the visit. Over time I hope the collation of materials will improve as this will facilitate a more helpful level of critical feedback. This year I did appreciate the availability of academic staff during the visit. This yielded valuable discussions and enhanced understanding of the programme.

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 provided was appropriate, though I am not sure that students always apply their knowledge of research methods appropriately. Too many follow the same formula of qualitative and quantitative research, often presenting statistical data in the same way regardless of the subject matter. When different approaches are taken, these are undervalued. For example, there are exceptional examples of visual methods being used, such as the student who compared four kinds of science fiction movies by creating a 'visual matrix'. More variety and initiative in adapting existing methods will help students understand how methods are transferable between practical and theoretical inquiry. Students will also benefit from being introduced to a wider range of dissertation models that exist in university programmes. For example, could a student write a historical dissertation, or about a particular designer or artist. How might this fit within the module? The methods may differ considerably from those examples I have seen in samples provided to date.

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?

The new format for the examination board trialled by the School seemingly worked well and I appreciated the time on the morning of the board to further review module work. I am satisfied with the recommendations of the board and generally found the administrative arrangements good.

I was disappointed not to have been informed of accommodation arrangements in advance of the visit. I offered to travel up the night before to allow more time to view student work, but did not receive confirmation before travelling, meaning this was a wasted opportunity.

During the visit some discussion took place about how to schedule visits in future, the likelihood being that these will cover two days with one overnight stay.

15. 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

I have made two visits this past year, allowing me the opportunity to gain better understanding of the culture of the programme within the university. I met students from each level of the programme who seem satisfied with their experience. In particular, year three students recognise how the organisation of the programme has improved since they arrived. This is to the credit of staff who are clearly aware of student needs as well as the demands of practice in the field. Students expressed positive reaction to live projects and competition briefs, the speedy response tutors provide to queries, and staff availability to answer their concerns, especially about grades.

Students are concerned about whether there is equitable standards of tuition on some modules, citing the different approaches taken by staff in delivering the learning and teaching methods in the dissertation module. For example, some received group tuition whilst others appeared to have one-to-one sessions. Their perception is that it differs and one student who received one-to-one would have preferred more group discussion. Students also requested more support with methodology in relation to the dissertation, making comparisons with what they perceive as happening in other disciplines such as Geography (where they understand there are dedicated tutors). This will clearly be addressed by the new methodology module in year two. Some did not recall the dissertation module handbook briefing session that clearly took place according to staff.

The cost of the programme was also raised for discussion and one suggestion is that modules may be more explicit about what is needed for submission in terms of the balance between physical and digital output submissions.

Year three students were appreciative of the contact teaching time made available to them in their final year, recognising the significant difference between the change in staff-student ratios between year one and year three.

During discussion I learned that the university does not accept marks below 20% or above 90%. I will appreciate reasons why this is the case.

The programme appears to be making progress after a number of key personnel changes in recent years. This year I found the work of a better standard than previously. I understand at the time of writing that two new appointments will be made to replace staff who left mid-year. It is important that these appointments support the consolidation of the programme's recent development. This may provide opportunity to reinforce existing teaching and alleviate some of the vulnerabilities that presently exist, especially where modules are staffed by an individual: this example carries great risk should staff be ill and raises questions about the rigour of second/blind marking and moderation of grades. Time for consolidation will also allow some of the larger challenges mentioned above to be planned and dealt with during the coming years.

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Dear <>,

Firstly, I'd like to begin by thanking you for taking the time to provide such a detailed report. The programme team value your contribution. Going through this year's report, there seems to be some concern on a number of issues so I'll respond to them in the same order that they are reported.

There was indeed an unfortunate delay in you receiving last year's response, but all I can do is apologise for this and guarantee that this report will reach you in good time. With regards your request for programme learning outcomes, please see the links 1- 3 at the end of this response as they provide the missing detail. You also identify inconsistencies with terminology on particular modules, so this information will be passed to the current Director of Student Education who will investigate as part of a wider audit. We appreciate your comments regarding learning outcomes/programme aims on particular modules, however these modules have already been approved by the University. Nevertheless, we are looking to review the current module structure and so would value your input on this process. You mention the inconsistency of the samples made available to you on your visit. Below is the list you have requested in your report. If you could confirm that these items are sufficient, I will endeavour to get them ready for our next meeting. Your visit will also be extended as requested.

- Module specification
- Project briefs (as applicable)
- List of dissertation topics (as applicable)
- Negotiated project submissions (as applicable)
- Sample of student work, one from each mark band
- Full set of grades for cohort including double and negotiated marks (as applicable)
- Written feedback to match the above sample

I am currently working on a new set of guidelines for assessment and feedback, but the main focus will be on explaining why marks are not higher and what each student needs to do in the future to improve. I will also instigate feedback tutorials so students can have a more detailed discussion with tutors about their personal progression. The comments made about the dissertation module have been passed onto the module leader and further discussion on this may be picked up when you visit the school.

With regard to both your and the students' comment on sketchbooks, we are looking to put in place some workshops in level one to address this. The new school-wide module (Research Methods) is currently running (see link 4) so we welcome any comments you may have. A dissertation from the University of Leeds tends to be more evidence based rather than historic, but a humanities model has been introduced this year so students may pursue an historic direction in the future.

Students also made comments to you regarding the cost of final year. The programme team have been asked to make sure students are aware that a high-cost finish is not required (and nor will this influence the grade received). The school has recently made a significant investment into equipment and so these costs should, in any case, be reduced.

We trust these comments are satisfactory and look forward to your next visit where time will be made to meet the School Examinations Officer and discuss specific issues of documentation and to give you further detail that we are not able to do here.

Yours sincerely,

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1. <http://webprod3.leeds.ac.uk/catalogue/dynprogrammesextra.asp?Y=201314&P=BA-TEXT%2FG%26CD&S=1>
2. <http://webprod3.leeds.ac.uk/catalogue/dynprogrammesextra.asp?Y=201314&P=BA-TEXT%2FG%26CD&S=2>
3. <http://webprod3.leeds.ac.uk/catalogue/dynprogrammesextra.asp?Y=201314&P=BA-TEXT%2FG%26CD&S=3>
4. <http://webprod3.leeds.ac.uk/catalogue/dynmodules.asp?Y=201314&M=DESN-2275>