

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:	Philosophy, Religion and the History of Science
Subject(s):	<i>Theology and Religious Studies</i>
Programme(s) / Module(s):	Theology and Religious Studies MA in Theology and Pastoral Studies, College of the Resurrection, Mirfield
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	BA, MA

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

None

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

During my period as external examiner at Leeds, academic standards have been consistently high. The extent of feedback to students following summative assessment has improved. The range of assessment methods has always been impressive, while the fit between assessment methods and learning outcomes for certain modules has improved. The marks achieved by students has shown some modest improvement over the last four years. However, please refer to my comments at the end of this report.

The MA in Theology and Pastoral Studies offered by the College of the Resurrection, Mirfield and validated by Leeds is now drawing to an end. The final students exiting this programme perform very well across the broad range of modules.

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 ILOs are commensurate with the levels of the awards.

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.*

Yes

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.*

A range of assessment methods is used within the Department. They are deployed fairly and rigorously, in a fashion appropriate to the learning outcomes of particular modules.

In at least one module, a seen exam was used as a method of assessment. Many students performed extremely well. However, some candidates had clearly memorised their essays in staggering detail, to the point of providing full bibliographic references with page numbers. These essays were essentially pieces of coursework reproduced under exam conditions. While the students' recall was very impressive, the arguments within these essays tended to be pedestrian. One wonders whether students are being awarded more for their powers of memory rather than their analytic skill. It may be beneficial to reflect on the precise benefits of a seen exam, particularly when students produce work which is very akin to coursework. Why a seen exam rather than a traditional unseen paper?

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.*

Yes

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

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 academic year 2012-13 has seen greater use of online marking. The extent of feedback is considerable amongst staff who adapt easily to online marking. In particular, the system enables markers to point easily to common mistakes made by students, particular with presentation and grammar. Over time, it will be interesting to see if online marking has any noticeable effect on student performance. The provision of such extensive feedback represents a considerable investment of staff time and skill. However, the outcomes and tangible benefits of this investment (beyond keeping NSS scores high) are yet to be measured rigorously. Do students act on the guidance they receive? If so, how?

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.

Modules are clearly research-led. A number of modules encourage the development of research skills amongst the students.

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

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.*

Yes

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

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?

Yes. The nature and level of questions was appropriate.

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?

Yes.

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

Yes. It would be good to see more students writing research dissertations.

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?

Yes on all counts

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

The scholarly apparatus was poor in some pieces of coursework which were otherwise excellent. Students tended to confuse footnote referencing with the Harvard system, or use a referencing system of their own devising. Perhaps students could be reminded of the need to acquire these basic academic skills and clearer penalties applied to work which is deficient in this regard.

In a cohort of fifty single honours students, only six were awarded a first class degree. This is an acceptable proportion, but it is certainly at the very low end for a Russell Group university. Marking standards within the Department are rigorous, but staff are reluctant to use the full range of marks and very rarely award marks towards 80%. I would encourage staff to award higher marks to the very best work. This may improve the overall average of some very strong students, thus raising the proportion of first class awards. This would, I think, better represent the quality of students at Leeds.

The system of 'moderation' or 'monitoring' of marking within the department works effectively. Occasionally, the proportion of work which is assessed by the monitor is a little low. Where there is disagreement between the first marker and the monitor, some indication of how this was resolved would be very helpful. It is good that, where a disagreement between first marker and monitor cannot be resolved, the work is referred directly to the External.

Within the School of Philosophy, Religion and History of Science, there is clearly a density of expertise in the philosophy of religion. The Department of Philosophy offers modules which clearly fall within the analytic school. I would encourage the Department of Theology and Religious Studies to be very distinctive in its offerings by focussing particularly on historical and continental approaches.



8th September 2013

Dear

Thank you very much for acting as external examiner for TRS at Leeds. It has been a real pleasure to work with you over the years. We have enormously appreciated your support and guidance, as well as your care and good humour in carrying out your duties. Thank you also for your most recent report. We are very glad to receive your positive comments on the state of our programmes and assessment overall. As you note, the last year has seen considerable changes for us both in terms of staffing and in terms of processes. We are pleased to have developed our team in philosophy of religion, and do indeed – as you suggest - have plans to offer teaching in continental philosophy to complement the strengths of PRHS colleagues.

In your comments you draw attention to a few ongoing issues that we are seeking to address. The questions about student engagement with new modes of feedback (for example electronic feedback), and about student understanding of our (recently changed) recommendations about referencing styles, will be kept under review, and we hope that consistent advice provided to new students in future years will help to avoid problems. You comment that it would be good to see more students doing research dissertations – in line with a University-wide policy development, we will be introducing compulsory research projects, starting with the cohort who begin their studies in 2014. We also hope that our new compulsory level 2 module, which includes structured preparation for independent research, will encourage more students even before then to undertake research dissertations.

The question about seen exams will be considered as part of reviews of those specific modules; in general, as you know, we try to use a wide range of modes of assessment appropriate to the modules in question, and think there is a place for seen exams alongside other modes of assessment, provided that students are given appropriate advice about how to approach them. Your final comment about the relatively low proportion of Firsts awarded, and the need to make more use of the marks at the top of the range in order better to reflect our students' achievements, has been taken on board and will certainly be acted on.

Thank you again for all your work, and very best wishes,