

**The University of Leeds**  
**EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT**  
**ACADEMIC YEAR: 2013– 2014**

**Part A: General Information****Subject area and awards being examined**

<i>Faculty / School of:</i>	School of Geography (Faculty of Environment)
<i>Subject(s):</i>	Geography: Geographical Information Science
<i>Programme(s) / Module(s):</i>	MSc Geographical Information Systems (GIS) MSc GIS via Online Distance Learning
<i>Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):</i>	MSc/PgD/PgC

**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](mailto: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*

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?*

Yes, thank you.

***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.*

The overall aims and learning objectives for the programme, the breadth of material covered in the course related to such outcomes compares very favourably with other Masters schemes offered elsewhere in the UK. The ILOs provide clear indications of what is needed to achieve a Masters in this area and coursework assessments are appropriate to the learning outcomes. The standards are appropriate for MSc level and provide suitable academic grounding for further PhD study or professional career in the industry. This is reflected in the high quality work produced by students on both programmes in response in the assignments.

**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.*

I have been following the progress of various Masters courses of similar content so as to advise graduating students in my role as tutor at Northumbria University. Although this is my first year as external examiner in Leeds, I have a feeling that it is one of best courses of its type in the UK in terms of the breadth and depth of material delivered. The colleagues delivering the courses have a strong reputation in the Quantitative Geography and GIS fields as innovative and cutting-edge researchers. The distance learning elements of the course are efficiently managed by responsive course leaders and the students on these courses are also benefiting by research-informed teaching of very high quality.

**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 design and structure of the types of assessment methods used are entirely appropriate and address the majority of the learning outcomes. There is an excellent balance of essay-style and project-style assessments, allowing the students to demonstrate a range of skills in relation to the learning outcomes. Historically, there have been no formal written examinations for these Masters, which makes sense, given the ILOs and future careers. The moderation procedures for all the modules are transparent, thorough and auditable. The students have commented that the quality of teaching is very high and that the balance of assessments is fair and match the learning outcomes. I reviewed a good range of assessed coursework for five modules: *Introducing GIS (GEOG5740)*; *Applied Population Analysis (GEOG5240)*; *Environmental Assessment (GEOG5830)*; *GI & Planning (GEOG5080)*; *Quantitative & Spatial Methods (GEOG5520)*. In addition, I reviewed a range of material for the ODL course, including a number of dissertations.

Overall, I am satisfied that all the material covered in these coursework assignments reflected the ILOs and that the assessment methods used were entirely appropriate. All markers have provided students with excellent feedback and reasonable explanations on how the marks were derived alongside suggestions for improvement where applicable. I am content that the students have produced some excellent work, demonstrating detailed understanding of theoretical and methodological concepts, as well as advanced techniques commensurate with empirical research.

**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, there were some very impressive assignments produced by students for the five modules I reviewed. Overall, there is a wide variety of assessment methods across the modules which permit a clear differentiation in marks based on student quality. Clear and stated criteria have been set for marking the assignments and the marking standards are consistently applied with a very transparent moderation processes in place. The level of written feedback provided to students is timely and generally to a high standard, allowing them to improve in subsequent submissions. There is also evidence of clear progression between modules from the first to the second semester. Two dissertations were of publishable quality, so I suggested that they should be nominated for national prizes. I am pleased that this was reflected in marks around 80%.

**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.*

This was my first year as external examiner so I relied mostly on the documents provided by the course team and the communication exchanged with the previous external examiner, <>, who mentored me.

I have also received past years' external examiner reports alongside the School's response to each report, noting any changes that have been made. I understand that the MSc programme was remodelled a couple of years ago with the addition of more modules (some compulsory) of GIS. From past reports it is evident that the students commented favourably on the GIS skills taught as well as the progression of skills and theories through the course.

As a conclusion of my first year, I would like to reiterate the examples of good practice highlighted by the previous external examiner: (i) I am impressed by the thorough documentation and transparency of module moderation; and (ii) the teaching team is to be commended for the responsiveness in adapting the course to a changing market, while it remains coherent.

To these I would like to add the excellent organisation of the programme and the enthusiasm of all the academic staff.

**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.*

It is evident from the module descriptors that the material provided to the students is cutting-edge of GIS/GISc practice and quantitative geography research in the UK and beyond. The curriculum clearly reflects the research interests of the academics teaching in these courses, who are leaders in their field with long standing reputations within the academic and practice communities. There are numerous examples of assignments and dissertations stemming from innovative research being undertaken within the School and from developments such as the TALISMAN node of the National Centre for Research Methods. In conclusion, there are clear links between their research and the teaching material and I have no doubt that the students of the Masters courses benefit from the incorporation of exciting and wide-ranging research material into the course curriculum.

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

These programmes do not form part of an Integrated PhD, but I am pleased to see that a couple of MSc graduates have progressed to PhD studies with the School of Geography. The course leaders clarified to me that students awarded a White Rose Doctoral Training Centre, quota/CASE or Advanced Quantitative Methods scholarship expected to progress to a quantitative human geography PhD, take the MSc GIS course as the first year of a 1+3 programme of PG studies.

**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**

I have received mentoring as a new examiner from <> (University of <>). I have been in touch with <> since I was approached to act as external examiner and was present to shadow <> at the Board of Examiners in October 2013. The mentoring process was extremely useful because it highlighted how to be an effective and fair external examiner, given the amount of material and documentation involved. <> has kindly remained in contact by email to address any queries I had on the procedures involved and I am grateful for the time <> allocated to me.

**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.*

This was my first year as external examiner for these award and I am impressed by the organisation of the courses and professionalism of the course leaders. All the material was made available to me by the School through the VLE in advance of the meeting and it was sufficient to enable me to make the required judgements. Any requests for clarifications were acted upon swiftly by email or during my visit to the School before the Board.

More specifically, I had access to the dissertations requested, summary of dissertation marks, individual mark sheets/mark agreement forms and the module handbook. My comments on the dissertations I examined were presented at the Exam board and fed into the allocation of dissertation marks. Overall I am very happy with the access arrangements, the information being provided, the examination procedures and feedback mechanisms, as well as the prompt response of the course leaders to any queries I may have had.

**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, I received all the appropriate documentation and the course leaders were very responsive for clarifications. More specifically, I received copies of the University's External Examiners Handbook and the Taught Students Handbooks, as well as the Module and Programme catalogue, which was useful for understanding the specific module descriptions. I also discussed the overall programme structure and plans for subsequent years with the course team prior to the Exam Board. Finally, I have been granted access to the VLE and would like to confirm that all the available documentation is clear and the policies and procedures are coherent with regards to the expectations and role of the external examiner.

**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?**

The assessment drafts are not shared with the External Examiner and support the previous external examiner's view for this arrangement to remain under the management of the course team. I have been kept informed throughout the year in relation to any major changes to assignments from previous years. There are no formal written examinations in these Masters and I am happy with the current arrangements.

**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?**

Yes, all the assignments for all the modules were made available for me to look at, alongside the with marking feedback, so that standards could be evaluated. As explained under point 3, I looked in detail 5 modules and I am satisfied. The majority of the assessed work was very clearly annotated with appropriate feedback to the students showing very clearly how the marks were derived. Any initial disagreements in marks were fully documented on mark sheets alongside a justification for the final agreement reached. In conclusion, I am very happy with the levels of assessed work I have seen.

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

Yes, overall there is an excellent and varied choice of subjects for dissertations and the outcome is of very high quality. Having read most of the dissertations alongside the feedback from all markers, I have great confidence in the dissertation marking process and the procedures in place to resolve potential marking disagreements between the markers. The standards of assessment are high, but fair, and the (blind) markers tend to be remarkably close in their grades. Most dissertations involve the use of methods taught during the course or reflecting the research interests of staff, but applied to original subject areas. I have been consulted on dissertation marks throughout the year and my comments have been relayed to the course team and taken into account for the awarding of marks. For example, last year one of the Dissertations (<->) was awarded a RGS-IBG GIScRG dissertation prize. This year there were at least two very strong dissertations of publishable quality that should also be nominated for prizes.

**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?**

Yes, I attended the Exam Board on 30/10/14 and was satisfied with the process and Board's recommendations. I am very happy with the arrangements and believe that meeting was fair to all candidates. I was also sent minutes of all relevant meetings during the course of the year and I am satisfied with the recommendations made and with the fact that my feedback has been taken into account. During the (excellent) lunch break, I met two current FT students and one student who graduated last year and is currently on a PhD course at the School of Geography. I also discussed with the course leaders some options for "meeting" ODL students, possibly via teleconferencing or by receiving feedback by email directly from the ODL (and maybe FT) students.

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

Yes, the procedures are very clear and I am content that the mitigating circumstances of students have been taken into account and reported appropriately in special cases meetings. I am confident that the necessary procedures are in place to try to support students in mitigating circumstances through their Masters studies.

**Other comments**

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

This was my first year as external examiner for the two Masters courses and as far as I am aware the transition from the previous external examiner <-> has been very smooth. I would like to put in record my thanks to <-> for mentoring me through this process, as well as the two course leaders <-> and <-> for keeping me informed without overburdening me and for making this transition seamless. I look forward to continuing as external examiner with Leeds.

School of Geography  
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**Response to external examiner report  
MSc GIS, face-to-face (f2f) and online distance learning (ODL)**

Dear

We are grateful to you for the time taken to review scripts, attend meetings and for other communications relating to the f2f and ODL courses; and for your recent report. We are pleased for the care you have taken to review our overall course curricula and the detail of module structure, assignment packages etc. In particular, it is gratifying to note that you have compared our content with other similar courses and found what we present to be one of the best in the UK.

In detail, we are pleased that you found the courses to be efficiently managed, with high quality, research-informed teaching and that the assessment methods cover a variety of methods and situations and that these prepare student well for possible later PhD or professional careers. In terms of assessment feedback, it is good that you find that we are providing timely and high standard feedback. This year, there have been several instances of exceptional student work which you have seen, including prize winning dissertations. In the near future, we will be reviewing the module handbooks and arrangements for dissertations and will share our draft revisions with you in due course.

In a wider setting, you note our integration of our teaching with other research and training programmes (e.g. TALISMAN) and that this feeds into the re-use of Masters teaching materials as PhD training courses. The development of high quality ODL materials means these can be provided to our PhD students too.

In terms of making materials available, the VLE is a valuable resource which we use for both f2f and ODL students. There are efficiencies and strengths in having these MSc courses running in as parallel a way as possible. You have reviewed our materials which have been made available via the VLE, along with online feedback, and we are pleased that you find the materials to be of high quality and that access is appropriate.

You have met current and a previous f2f student and found this to be a useful exercise to get the student perspective and will repeat this exercise later in the year. We managed to arrange virtual meetings between the previous external examiner and ODL students. Whilst this is a tricky thing to organise, we will endeavour to set up some direct contact between you and some ODL students in due course; this may be by Skype or by email.

This has been your first year as external examiner and we are pleased that the arrangements have all gone smoothly and that the courses come over well. It has been useful for us to introduce the f2f and ODL courses to a new person as this allows the course team to reflect on, and explain the purposes of, our courses both broadly and in detail.

Yours sincerely

Senior Lecturer in Critical Human Geography  
Head of School