

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

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

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| <i>Faculty / School of:</i> | School of Modern Languages and Cultures |
| <i>Subject(s):</i> | Russian |
| <i>Programme(s) / Module(s):</i> | Modules with SLAV prefix, at levels 2 and 3 for Joint Honours Programmes |
| <i>Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):</i> | BA |

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 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 are no matters requiring 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?

N/A

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 were fully commensurate with 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.*

I have been external examiner at many UK (and Irish) HE institutions; on the basis of this extensive experience and my own experience within the subject I am confident that the programme is fully comparable with equivalent programmes at other institutions. This is now my third year at Leeds, and these standards continue to be conformed with.

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.*

In assessing work at Leeds, I again had the opportunity to consider a very wide range of assessment methods. These included oral presentations in Russian, translation from and into Russian, free composition in Russian, grammatical exercises; extended essays on a variety of topics, and lengthy dissertations. Clearly, considerable thought had gone into the design of the assessments (particularly within the language work): judging by this very extensive and varied evidence, I am confident that the design and structure of the assessment methods are fully appropriate.

Marking and classification were also exemplary. The standard of achievement by students was very good indeed, and in a variety of ways: some of the student work I saw was amongst the best I have seen anywhere, and I would once more especially single out the final year dissertations, which allowed the students to display flair, individuality and originality. As I remarked during the examiners' meetings, this does not happen by chance, and I was impressed by the quality of the teaching that clearly underpins this level of performance. Here I would wish to single out for praise the quality and type of feedback provided to students. This is often very detailed and now exclusively typed, both of which attributes are to be commended. I again attended the Orals and was very impressed not merely by the students' linguistic attainments, but by their research and presentational skills as well. Each Oral is presented with a PowerPoint (or equivalent). I have now externalised over 20 years in about 10 institutions in England, Scotland and Ireland, and, in terms of transferable skills, I would say that the Orals at Leeds are the best I have seen anywhere.

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 3 above. In addition to my comments there, I would also note that the level of linguistic attainment by some students was outstanding, with the marks in some language modules being exceptionally high. As noted above, the performance of some students was the best I have seen anywhere. I did not detect any significant weaknesses. Stand-out achievements were in language work, especially the final-year oral, the dissertations and year-abroad projects. I would again emphasise that the *variety* of types of assessments allowed *all* students the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities and achievements.

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.

Some modules had been modified and updated and this 'refreshment' of the offering is to be welcomed. I also note with satisfaction that some assessment practices have also been improved, such as the move to exclusively typed feedback.

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.

The influence of research was clearly manifest in a variety of modules, which produced some very interesting and unusual student work. Leeds has several research-active members of staff who are pre-eminent in their fields, and this is clearly manifest in the impacts on student learning. In reverse, however, I noted with regret and a little concern the relative dearth of 'mainstream' nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian literature and history. I am aware that student and staff numbers constrain the viability of wider offerings, but I would again suggest that creative ways might be investigated to diversify provision in non-language areas.

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

N/A

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.*

I received sufficient guidance to perform my role effectively.

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.*

In the course of the academic year 2013-2014 I received module handbooks, marking criteria and so on for all the modules that I would be moderating, so I can say that I did indeed receive appropriate documentation relating to the programme for which I had responsibility.

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 received draft assessments, and was able to comment on them as relevant. The questions and assignments were appropriate, and changes were made when I suggested them.

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?

I had made available to me, I think, ALL assessed material for levels 2 and 3. In sampling these materials I would say that the scripts were clearly marked, and, as noted above, the system of feedback is excellent. I would say that I have confidence in my evaluation of the standard of student work.

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

This area was one of the outstanding aspects of student work. Dissertations were written, many to a very high standard, on a very wide range of topics, including the Russian Gothic, The Representation of Chechens in Russia Media; Trotsky; Dystopian Fiction; Doping in Athletics; the Visibility of Lesbians; Kollontai; Women in the Red Army; the novel *Eugene Onegin*. The opportunity for students to choose their own very individual topic is an excellent feature, and facilitates real excellence; the method and standard of assessment were entirely appropriate.

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 administrative arrangements were completely satisfactory for the whole process. The operation of the Board of Examiners was exemplary; I was able to attend the meeting, and I was satisfied with its recommendations.

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

At the Board of Examiners there were references to various cases of mitigating circumstances, and these were properly discussed. I was also informed of the way that the mitigating circumstances and medical evidence systems operate at Leeds. Procedures in these areas seem entirely satisfactory.

Other comments

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

In my report last year I raised a number of issues and I am pleased to report that the most serious of these, the use of the so-called 'base-room' has been modified. I am very pleased that Leeds staff have been responsive in this matter, and I feel that I was able to execute my role much more efficiently and effectively this year.

In addition to the comments above I would like to add the following by way of summary of the overwhelmingly positive experience of examining at Leeds, as well as to raise a couple of ongoing concerns. These comments will summarise and develop what I have already said.

A. General remarks

As in my first two years I have been very positively impressed by almost all aspects of my work for and at Leeds University.

I have received all appropriate materials and information in good time so that I have been able to conduct my work as external examiner for Russian in an appropriate manner.

I have found all staff at Leeds, administrative and academic alike, to be very welcoming, responsive and highly professional. I perceive relationships between staff and students to be excellent as is evidenced by the overall standard of work that I have seen and, especially, by the conduct of the Orals: as noted elsewhere, these are a paragon of the format!

In my first year I commented on the fact that I had found the 'base room' system unsatisfactory for a variety of reasons. Leeds responded to this and so, at my request, I have again been sent materials on a number of occasions. This has greatly improved the conditions in which I have been able to work, and has moved Leeds closer in line with national practices.

I have been sent a great variety of materials, essays, examinations, presentations materials and some other materials. In all cases, I have been impressed by both the standard of student performance and by the level of professionalism of the marking. This last comment is the case in several respects: standards of marking are consistent, both internally and across modules, and as against national criteria and benchmarks. The quality and helpfulness of feedback is very good, and it is good to see that all of it is now typed.

Student attainment is high with a significant proportion of students achieving first class marks, and very few marks at the lower end of the scale, with even fewer fail marks, except for technical reasons (for example, late submission). This level of attainment betokens both a high level of ability amongst students, but also high quality teaching and guidance.

While all the work has been of a high quality, I would especially like to comment on the Orals and dissertations, as noted earlier. More broadly, I have noted that it is especially where students are given (virtually) free choice in what they write / talk about that they do best.

I attended all the Oral exams this year, as observer alongside the three internal examiners, and on 28-29 May. This was a most enjoyable, informative and impressive experience.

The examiners conducted the exams with complete professionalism and expertise. They ensured that all candidates were put at their ease, while maintaining a proper air of seriousness. While naturally a small number of candidates were anxious and nervous, the examiners did all they could to reassure them.

The whole process was impressive. In particular, while giving presentations has been standard practice at many universities for many years, using a PowerPoint is an excellent addition, which required the candidates to demonstrate a variety of transferable skills. While mixed in quality, even the worst of the presentations were interesting and of value, while some were outstanding and were clearly the result of considerable effort and research. I was slightly surprised, though, that there is no approval process for the topics, although the subject matter did not present any difficulties.

Indeed, the range of topics was truly impressive and included two on the World Cup, Eurovision, with particular reference to Conchita Wurst, Vodka, New Teaching and Technology, the EU, Heavy Metal, Halal Meat, Gypsies, Cosmetic Surgery, as well as some, though the minority, on Russian themes, Russophobia, Feminism in Russia, Civil Society in Russia, Homosexuality in Russia. While such great diversity, and *freedom of choice*, is brilliant, we might want to reflect on the question as to whether a Russian Oral should be more linked to things Russian.

Naturally, the standards varied quite markedly, although the majority were very good, with several distinctions, 7/20 altogether. The spread of marks was also a reasonable one, with 7 Firsts, 7 2,1s and 6 2,2s - the most even spread of all the marks I've seen. There seems, paradoxically, not always to be any correlation between the length of time spent in Russia, and the ability to speak Russian well! All in all, this was a very impressive occasion which spoke of excellent tuition and excellent work by the majority of students - especially as most, I think, came to Leeds as beginners.

I would say, indeed, that, the highlight of my involvement with Leeds this year has been my attendance at the Orals. I would like to propose that it be an expectation that a ML examiner attend the orals in their language at least once. **I made this proposal last year as well, and have received no response to it; I also believe that this proposal has not been implemented – and perhaps not even discussed.**

Dissertations

As with the Orals there was again a very impressive range of topics: it is great to see such diversity! There is very ample and

helpful feedback for all the work I've looked at. The students' work itself also displays very high levels of expertise, reflecting once more the high level of input from supervisors.

B. Individual Comments, Suggestions / Recommendations

1. As I also commented in both the previous years, I gather that almost all Russian modules are only completed in the course of the year, that is they are, to use the parlance, 'long-thin' modules. I suppose one of the implications of universities moving to semesters and modules was to create distinct units of learning that students would complete and then move on at the end of the semester. The situation at Leeds seems to be at variance with those principles.

2. I understand that it is because of the numbers problem, but there are not very many modules available to Russian students beyond language. If the university could think of creative ways to diversify the offering of Russian modules beyond language, I am sure everyone would find that helpful.

3. Over the three years I have examined at Leeds I have become used to the 20-90 system of marking within GRASS. However, as noted before, it is manifestly, by Leeds' own admission, far from satisfactory, and clearly different from the simpler percentage system used more or less throughout the British education system. I therefore urge you to consider moving to that system.

School of Languages, Cultures and Societies

FACULTY OF ARTS



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

02 March 2015

Dear

External Examiner Report – 2013-14

Many thanks for your External Examiner report and helpful feedback on our modules and procedures. We are pleased to hear that once again the procedures at each stage of the year's activities ran smoothly and that once again you were impressed by the achievements of our students.

We are also very pleased that you were able to attend the Final Year Orals: we are delighted that you would hold them up as a paragon of good practice; this is particularly valued given your extensive experience as an External Examiner. I am sorry that you felt your suggestion for all School External Examiners to be invited to attend orals at least once during their tenure was not given due consideration. I am assuming that this oversight was simply due to the multi-faceted challenges of co-ordinating a large team of External Examiners across a School of our size. I will ensure that your suggestion is passed on to the School Exams and Assessment Officer for consideration for 2014-15.

Thank you also for noting the improvements and enhancements made in our modules and procedures, such as the typed feedback and the updates to modules. It is helpful to know that the impact of these changes is beneficial.

We are particularly gratified to hear your opinion that those areas with the greatest level of student autonomy are where there are the highest levels of excellence. This is especially important for us in our efforts to develop skills of independent learning and critical enquiry in the curriculum.

Thank you for sharing your concerns with us. With regard to the structure of modules in relation to semesters, we will bear your comments in mind. Some modules we feel are not best suited to single semester patterns; however, for 2014-15 there will be two level 3 modules running as 'short-fat' single semester modules, one in the first semester and one in the second semester. Also, the Russian team is considering a revision of the first year non-language modules and we will investigate whether the use of single semester modules may be appropriate here. With regard to the range of module topics, again we acknowledge that greater diversity would be ideal, but we are constrained both by staff and student numbers and have so far been unsuccessful in seeking shared teaching opportunities with units outside the School, as the larger subject areas such as History have less need of such initiatives. On the 20-90 scale, we note your concerns; as this is a University-level issue, I will draw your comments to the attention of our central Quality Assurance Team.

On behalf of the whole of GRASS I would like to thank you for your useful comments on draft assessments sent during the year, your careful scrutiny of student work and our practice as well as your particular attention to individual cases on which we have asked for your special input. We look forward to working with you again during the next academic year and to seeing you again next summer.

Best wishes,

Director of Russian
School of Languages, Cultures and Societies
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Email
Tel: