

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:	Faculty of Arts/School of Modern Languages and Cultures
Subject(s):	<i>Linguistics and phonetics</i>
Programme(s) / Module(s):	BA in Linguistics and Phonetics (and combined honours programmes)
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	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

None, except replacing the outgoing member of staff with expertise in phonetics and phonology. This is obviously crucial to a BA in Linguistics and Phonetics.

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

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

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 intended learning outcomes are entirely appropriate for both the single and combined honours programmes.

The standards are – on the whole – appropriate, and I did not suggest changing individual marks. That said, I do feel that the marking is perhaps a little on the ungenerous side at the bottom end of the scale, particularly in certain modules. When the final breakdown of marks across different grade bands becomes available, the department should consider whether or not it matches national averages – available at <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/content/view/3129/#qua> Currently, I suspect that proportion of 2:1s may be lower than average, and the proportion of 2:2s higher.

I also invite the department to consider the issue of consistency across different modules, in order to ensure that students choosing particular optional modules are not disadvantaged. In particular, mean marks for 3rd Year modules ranged from 55 to 69. A few modules did have their marks moved up or down by a few marks at the suggestion of the moderator, but this was done in a rather ad hoc way, rather than with a particular mean – or consistent means across modules - in mind. It may be that different means are entirely appropriate given the different standards of students and/or work produced on the modules – but this is something to consider.

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.*

Both the single and joint honours degree programmes meet national benchmarks, and are extremely similar to those of equivalent degrees at other institutions.

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.*

Each module (except the dissertation) includes one piece of exam and one or more pieces of coursework (typically counting for around 20%). The range of tasks in the assignment was excellent (discourse analysis, phonology workbook, essay, group project, oral/aural components) and I appreciated the flexibility module co-ordinators have in matching the task to the intended learning outcomes of the module. The exams also followed a wide range of different formats (MCQs, short answers, essays) which were well matched to the different topics. One issue is that I was surprised to see that MCQs are not marked automatically – I would suggest that the department invest in a scanner.

The marking and moderation systems seem to be very robust. In particular, I was pleased to see that marks were sometimes moved up or down in response to suggestions from the moderator, which does not seem to happen often at other institutions. The level of feedback was excellent for all modules. The projects are all double-marked, which is important given the double-weighting of the module.

One issue for discussion however is the marking scheme. I was surprised to see that a categorical scheme is not used for essay marking as it is at my own – and other- institutions (e.g., a 2:1 mark can be only 62, 65 or 68). I feel that the adoption of such a scheme would help to clear up some of the discrepancies between modules, and would also be fairer (I'm not confident that markers can really distinguish between work deserving – say – 64, 65 or 66).

The standard of work produced was very high overall, and I was particularly impressed by performance in the syntax modules and the dissertation.

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.*

As noted above, the wide range of assessments offers students ample opportunity to show their strengths and weaknesses. However, as also noted above, the marks are – probably – a little lower than for students at comparable institutions, which I think is more likely a result of strict marking standards at the bottom end, rather than lower student ability.

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

NA

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.

None of which I am aware – the previous external examiner served for four years, and I think all enhancements suggested had been made in previous years.

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.

Most modules are taught by a member of staff who has published important research in the relevant area. Students achieving the highest marks in the project often conduct research that would seem to be of a publishable standard. One issue I identified however is that staff seem overstretched, with a standard teaching load of 4 modules, plus contributing to other co-taught UG and MA modules. I feel this is out of line with comparable institutions, where 2 modules per staff-member would be more usual. An increase in staffing levels would allow staff to devote more time to research, and further improve the quality of the teaching

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

NA

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, the documentation was sufficient. However I would request that – rather than me having to search through large piles – the module coordinators/moderators/office staff pre-select samples of the highest, lowest and average scoring work, as well as any particular pieces of work requiring special attention.

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, I provided feedback on the draft exams, and was very satisfied with the response from staff.

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 (though see 9). All scripts were available, as were spreadsheets of module marks (though in a couple of cases the means were missing).

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

Yes, this was a real strength. The standard of marking was entirely appropriate, and there were no cases of discrepancies between markers that I was asked to consider. I did examine one failing piece, and agreed with the decision of the markers.

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

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 suggest that, in future, the department have two external examiners. The time available allowed me only 30 minutes per module, which was not really time to examine the work in any detail. Having two EEs would allow us to examine a decent sample of scripts, and would provide expertise in a wider range of areas.

For MCQs, beware of having too many Cs as correct answers. For one module, 9/23 correct answers were C (a well known strategy in MQCs is “if in doubt, pick C”) and only 3/23 were A (again, avoiding putting correct answers first is a well known trait of MCQ-setters). I’m sure this is being done, but the rubric needs to be clear in MCQ exams where more than one answer can be correct.

A written procedure should be in place for when students answer too many questions: Should you mark them all and choose the best, or mark the first questions, discarding later ones?

A topic for discussion in the department is whether/how to aim for more of a balance between nativist/P&P and alternative approaches, particularly in the syntax and language acquisition modules. Is there room for this in the curriculum, or would any extra topics have to be covered in – for example – masters courses?

My department has a policy that lateness penalties can never take work down to a failing mark- something to consider?

Dissertation. There is a bit of a discrepancy over whether or not students are required to conduct statistical analyses of their data (I saw 80s that did not and 40/50s that did, as well as an excellent 85, where the student had taught herself multiple linear regression from scratch). Ideally, I would introduce a research methods and statistics modules, as this would provide valuable transferable skills. Obviously this would only be possible with significant staffing increases, so perhaps more realistic would be to have just one or two basic stats sessions that all students are invited to attend. Finally, I understand that there is already an oral-presentation component, which is important as this is another valuable transferable skill. However, I wasn’t sure if this is merely formative, or if students receive a mark that counts towards the overall project grade. If they don’t currently, this may be something to consider.

Linguistics and Phonetics
School of Modern Languages and Cultures



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

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11th of July 2014

Dear

Many thanks for your External Examiner's Report for the 2013-2014 UG programmes in Linguistics & Phonetics.

We note with appreciation your positive comments on the range of tasks used in our assessments and their alignment with the intended learning outcomes, as well as on the robustness of our marking and moderation procedures. We are pleased to see the quality of our students' work commended, especially on the dissertation module.

We thank you for your suggestions regarding our marking scheme, and will discuss each of them in depth at our Teaching Forum in the Autumn Term. These include: (i) parity across modules, (ii) comparability with grades awarded in similar programmes at other institutions, (iii) the use of a categorical marking scheme, (iv) MCQ procedures, (v) how to mark scripts in which too many questions were answered, (vi) the ultimate impact of lateness penalties, (vii) the expectations regarding quantitative analyses in the dissertation module. We have been embedding more research methods into our programme, but we agree more can be done, especially in terms of quantitative analysis. This is something we will keep trying to improve.

The balance between nativist and other approaches is addressed across modules but at present we consider it impossible to achieve within each sub-discipline of linguistics, in our UG programmes. This is indeed one of the aspects in which our UG and MA programmes differ.

We agree our programmes cannot be delivered successfully without adequate staffing in phonetics and phonology, and will continue discussing this issue with the School and the Faculty in the coming academic session. Staffing will certainly be a challenge in this coming academic year, especially in light of the projected student numbers, but we will do our very best to maintain high standards of teaching and assessment as well as student support. Our aim for the long term is to continue delivering research-led teaching of the highest quality.

We will enquire as to the possibility of appointing a second external examiner, as you suggest.

Yours sincerely,

Director of Linguistics & Phonetics