

The University of Leeds

EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2014– 2015

Part A: General Information

Subject area and awards being examined

Faculty / School of:	School of Geography
Subject(s):	Human Geography
Programme(s) / Module(s):	BA Geography, BA Geography with Transport Planning
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 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?

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

My initial appointment coincided with the introduction of a new programme in the School, so I have been able to see how this has progressed over the term of my appointment and how modules have been introduced on a year by year basis. Overall, I think the programme has been a success and staff have been responsive to feedback from both students and the examiners to modify these where necessary e.g. changes to the first year module 'Local to Global' and more recently to overseas field-based modules. The procedures of the School, as well as learning and teaching provision, were already of a very high standard at the outset of my appointment and these standards have been maintained and improved.

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 Intended Learning Outcomes are appropriate for the programmes of study and with the levels of the award. The human geography components of the degree programmes provide a stimulating and challenging range of modules for the students. These clearly provide students with subject-specific skills, but also with broader transferable skills. The learning outcomes encourage students to engage with employability skills, specifically in those modules targeted at these outcomes, but they are also present in more academically-focused modules. Staff do need to ensure that module aims and learning outcomes are fully met for all students and that students are adequately briefed in order to be able to do this.

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, the aims and ILOs are comparable with similar programmes at other institutions that I have knowledge of, and compatible with subject benchmarks. The programme provides a number of high quality modules that cover the majority of disciplinary and sub-disciplinary debates within Human Geography.

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 assessment methods are appropriate for the ILOs. A variety of assessment methods are used within the School in order to test different types of knowledge, students' ability to research into a topic, as well as analytical and interpretative skills. The School now uses different marking criteria for different types of assessment and written guidelines on these are available for students. Arrangements for marking of the modules and the classification of awards are also appropriate and well thought out. Module feedback forms were very good. The module moderation forms are excellent and their use should be promoted across the University as an example of good practice. One area that needs consideration is the lack of marks at the top end of the range. This is more of an issue for physical geography modules, but is an area that the School should consider. One way to do this might be through the introduction of a discontinuous marking scheme. We use such a scheme at <> and this has been successful in shifting staff attitudes towards awarding marks at the top of the range. I have provided a copy of this to School staff and would recommend that the School considers whether this, or other marking schemes, might be of benefit if adopted.

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 this came through in student performance in individual modules and for the programme as a whole where students' academic standards were clearly demonstrated. The module evaluation forms were particularly helpful in taking note of student feedback and the actions that had been taken to respond to this.

The external examiners met with a group of students earlier in the year (May) via Skype at the same time as a staff-student forum meeting. This provided much better interaction and feedback than in previous years when the examiners met with very small groups of students who were still in Leeds at the time of the examiners' visit. It is recommended that similar meetings (either in person or by Skype) are held in future years. Overall, students were full of praise for both the programme and for the commitment and enthusiasm of staff. However, there were two areas where they expressed concern. One related to feedback on assessed work where students felt there are inconsistencies between staff in the speed of feedback. Second, students expressed a view that some students were choosing modules based on perceptions of how 'hard' or otherwise staff teaching the module marked assignments. Both these areas need further investigation by the School, notably the first point which is also highlighted in student response to the feedback satisfaction question in the NSS.

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.

I made the comment last year that students could be stretched a bit more in future in terms of the standard of work expected for both the Miami and Mumbai field work modules. This has happened this year and the clearer guidance provided for students to undertake the visual essay for the Mumbai field trip certainly seems to have resulted in some excellent short videos which have been made available to the student group on Vimeo. These materials could usefully be used for promoting fieldwork at Leeds on the School's website.

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.

There is evidence that staff research feeds into individual module delivery and also through student field work. Students appear to appreciate the enthusiasm for the subject material and for teaching that arises from staff engagement with research. The module GEOG3820 Research Placement enables students to work with a member of staff on a research project and to complete a research report. This seemed an excellent introduction to, and preparation for, research and it was obvious from most of the research reports that students had benefitted from staff advice and input. Staff need to ensure that students fulfil the objectives of this module, as in three cases students did not provide a full presentation of their results and concluding discussions. This will help ensure that students are marked against the module criteria, rather than the level of their engagement with the research topic.

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

Not applicable

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

Not applicable

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.

Yes, clear guidance is provided in the External Examiner Handbook and also from information sent out in advance by the School.

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 had copies of the School's Code of Practice on Assessment and the Undergraduate Student Handbook, as well as dissertation guidelines, the module and programme catalogue and marking criteria. A range of statistical information on modules and programmes was provided which was helpful in assessing variations in marks across modules. Last year I asked for the standard deviation to be included in these figures and this was provided this year.

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?

Yes, I saw draft examination papers and assessments at an early stage of the year. For the most part the nature and level of the questions were entirely appropriate. For a few of these I suggested some minor changes and these were incorporated into the final versions.

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. I saw a range of assessed and examined work. Assessed/examined work was made available for a range of modules and I sampled these to ensure that the evaluation of student work was appropriate. Access to the work through the VLE in advance of my visit to the School was particularly helpful in that it allowed more time to be spent looking at these, rather than trying to read large amounts of assessments and examinations in one day. The exam scripts and assessed work were clearly marked, with some excellent feedback provided. An issue which did arise was access to the VLE in relation to login details. It would be helpful if IT services could ensure that VLE usernames and passwords remain active for the full period of an external examiner's appointment and not deactivated at the end of each academic year. This would benefit both the external examiners and School staff – the latter had to spend time and effort ensuring these were updated for the examiners.

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

Yes, I looked at a range of dissertations across the range of marks and the methods and standards of assessment were appropriate. I was asked to look at one specific dissertation where markers had disagreed and was able to calibrate this against the other examples. One of the strengths of the School is that students use both quantitative methods and more qualitative approaches.

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, the administrative arrangements for the whole process are entirely satisfactory. I attended the Board of Examiners and this was conducted in a fair and rigorous manner. The recommendations of the Board were also entirely satisfactory.

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

Yes, it was clear that due consideration had been given to both mitigating circumstances and medical evidence.

Other comments

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

School of Geography
University of Leeds
Leeds LS2 9JT



30.06.2015

Dear

Head of School response to the BA External Examiner's Report

I am writing to express, on behalf of the School, my thanks for your work as external examiner on our BA programmes this year, and indeed for the last four years. The role you have played in ensuring we deliver a high quality education in Human Geography is appreciated by everyone here.

Your tenure as external examiner coincided with the introduction of our new curriculum, so you have been able to follow through all three years of delivery. We are pleased that you conclude the new programme has been a success, and that where necessary we have made efforts to be responsive to feedback from both students and external examiners. Last year you identified issues with two L3 field trip modules, in terms of not stretching the students sufficiently, and we are pleased to hear that you feel this has been resolved.

Whilst you found no matters requiring urgent attention, you did identify four areas for our attention based on your external examination:

- (a) Inconsistency in staff feedback response times. You noted that students identified mixed practice amongst staff, with some taking too long to return feedback. You identified that the inconsistency in practice was the real problem, and was likely to hurt our NSS feedback scores. Our code of practice for AY15/16 stipulates students should receive feedback within 15 working days, with allowances for staff involved in teaching field trips. We believe this to be an appropriate standard, and will focus our efforts on ensuring staff adhere to the agreed code, and keep students well informed where this is difficult for practical reasons.
- (b) You identified that students perceived some staff marked 'soft or hard', and made module choices accordingly. We will make further efforts to ensure that all staff mark to the agreed marking criteria. This has been made more tractable following your recommendation to introduce more functionally resolved marking criteria, but it is the Exam Board's view that there is variability here in practice between staff – i.e. some are marking more rigidly against these new marking criteria than others. We will reinforce the 'mark to the criteria' message amongst staff. Hopefully, this problem should decline as an issue as the new marking criteria schemes become ingrained in marking practice.

- (c) You identified that there was a need for staff to ensure module aims and ILOs are met for all students on a module, with students fully aware of expectations upon them. This is a response to your review of the Research Placement module (GEOG3820), where it is evident there was differential practice across tutors on this module. We will in future ensure that students and tutors are adequately briefed by the convenor on expectations, and on how work will be assessed. We do not plan to institute full double marking for GEOG3820, but the convenor will take a more active role in ensuring consistency of tutor practice and appraisal, including internal moderation of marks prior to release to students. A revised set of bespoke marking criteria will be developed in consultation with Research Placement tutors, and reviewed by STSEC.
- (d) You identified a lack of marks at the top end of the range (an issue which particularly affects the BSc programme). We have been aware of this for some time, and indeed have followed your advice to make staff stretch the mark range. Some have adopted this practice readily, others not. Your suggestion to adopt a discontinuous mark scheme is a welcome one. We will review such schemes and anticipate introducing a discontinuous scheme in future, in the first instance with respect to the L3 dissertation. We will review how this alters mark distribution in practice, prior to any further revision of mark criteria elsewhere.

Notwithstanding the above, we are also pleased to hear that you find our assessment processes are varied, and of a high standard. With your assistance we hope to raise our standards further.

Thanks you again for your service to the School over the last four years. Please accept our best wishes for your next endeavour.

With all best wishes

Head of School