

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:	Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies
Subject(s):	<i>Cultural Studies</i>
Programme(s) / Module(s):	
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?

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

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 Cultural Studies programme at Leeds is characterised by a rigorous training in intellectual, philosophical-theoretical traditions with a shared focus on everyday cultural, communicative and aesthetic practices, and their contested political, ethical and institutional positions. I was particularly impressed with the ways in which modules such as *State of Utopias*, *Cities and Film*, and *Making Sense of Sound* offered students innovative ways of thinking with and through cultural 'objects' and 'environments'. I'm sure that this must take place 'in class' on the other modules, and indeed I look forward to seeing work from *The Complete Marilyn Monroe* next year.

However, from a disciplinary and developmental point of view, I wonder whether the dominance of post-Kantian Continental philosophy, German critical theory and French poststructuralist thought on many of the modules I've seen might make room for an engagement with a wider range of theoretical and disciplinary traditions, which arguably characterise recent cultural studies scholarship and curricula.

Overall, I have every confidence that this course provides students with an appropriately challenging and critical trans-disciplinary education, and that the forthcoming reconfiguration as Media and Cultural Studies, alongside other programme combinations, will further extend its reach.

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.*

Overall I am satisfied that the programme at Leeds meets the appropriate requirements set out in the subject benchmarks statement and by the FHEQ, and that it is comparable to similar courses with which I am familiar at UK 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.*

Essays and exams are in majority here, although there are some interesting variations on the exam format. There are signs of some experimentation in assessment, such as the fascinating project on utopias and the project work on *Beyond the Trench*, but I think that there is room to develop a wider range of assessment practice, including forms which would develop students' digital literacy.

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. The best work I saw demonstrated a theoretical sophistication and in some cases a clear aptitude for articulating complex ideas. I also saw the usual weaknesses of their contemporaries, such as poor historical knowledge, and a lack of confidence in applying theoretical ideas in cases of weaker work, even in some cases of the more ambitious theoretical work.

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.

I note that my predecessor remarked on improvements to the variety of assessment methods, which I have commented on in §3, above, but I would also highlight the use of screencasts and other learning materials on the VLE for *Cities & Film* and *Vision, Discourse, Power & Practice*, which might be used to show how an online learning environment can be used as more than a document repository.

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.

This is a key strength of the curriculum at Leeds. World-leading researchers teach in areas of personal expertise, including critical and cultural theory, Continental philosophy, deconstruction, feminist theory, aesthetics, sound studies. This expertise is evident in the impressive intellectual ambition of the strongest student work, but it is good to see that some of the less successful work still strives to grasp and apply the ideas.

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

N/A

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

N/A

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.

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.

This information is available online in the course catalogue, but was not consistently presented in module handbooks which varied widely – some very detailed, others were rather perfunctory. I would recommend that the team ensure that there is consistency in the presentation of module documentation.

Use of the VLE was also variable with excellent use of screencast mini-lectures on *Cities & Film*, but also some examples of disorganised course material, with week-specific information located both in 'Module information' and 'Learning Resources'.

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?

I was sent some but not all draft exam papers, which may have been due to not taking up the post until second semester. I was not asked provide feedback on draft papers in advance of final examinations, but on the whole I thought the questions were appropriate to level and topic.

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 can confirm that standards of feedback and marking give me confidence that the work submitted is equivalent to

national standards, although I also noted some variation in detail of feedback and evidence of moderation. I saw a range of work from all modules, some marked on paper copies, others marked online using Grademark (and then either printed out or just made available on the VLE). I would have appreciated a clearer indication of which format I should expect in each case, though, as well as greater consistency in the composition of samples that I'm sent – i.e. 20% sample of all grade bands.

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

Yes. The dissertations I saw clearly demonstrated the intellectual and theoretical 'reach' that this programme engenders, although both arguably lost sight of their proposed 'object', presenting theoretically front-loaded arguments that did not lead to the sustained critical analysis of specific examples that each project promised. The method and standard of assessment was rigorous and appropriate in both cases.

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 exam board was run very efficiently. My only discomfort was with the way the University deals with upper grade boundary calculations; namely, the fact that a student at Leeds can achieve an overall First class mark with a 'best average' mark of 68. This is a broader notion of 'borderline' than I am used to. However, I realise that this is a matter of institutional assessment policy, not peculiar to the operation of this Board, so I would be interested to learn whether it has been by other external examiners across the university.

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

Yes – although here, too, mitigating circumstances are handled rather differently than in other institutions I've encountered.

Other comments

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

Nothing more to add.



School of Fine Art History of Art & Cultural Studies

Reply to the External Examiner's Report for BA Cultural Studies 2015

External Examiner:
Report received 2.10.2015

The Cultural Studies Team welcomed the overall assessment of the degree programme and the assessment procedures which were positive.

Standards comments on the strong focus of the degree on 'post-Kantian Continental philosophy, German critical theory and French poststructuralist thought'.

Response: The degree was established and clearly advertises itself in terms of creating a space in the British University system for that field of Cultural Studies, as defined in the Benchmark statements on the discipline, that focus on philosophical and critical theory, continental as opposed to British traditions in the formation of cultural studies, on feminist theory and psychoanalytical cultural studies. This orientation is based on the research expertise that has been built up in Leeds in areas of cultural studies that are little represented in those degree programmes that are based on the British formation of cultural studies. There is a clear theoretical framework for this degree that begins at Level 1 with Introduction to Cultural Analysis, builds on this through the level 2 core modules on Aesthetics and culminates for the student in a choice of core modules at level 3 (Deconstruction, sexual difference, Frankfurt School). This focus is made clear to students at all levels of application and interview. In addition it is important to note that the degree includes modules in popular culture that draw on ethnographic traditions in cultural studies, and the students are able to take a range of modules in the School's array that engage fully with the cultural studies of cinema, museology, photography and contemporary cultural forms. The evidence of their engagement in the full range of cultural studies and a focus on popular culture appears in their dissertation topics.

The decision to enlarge the degree to cultural and media studies intends to retain the strengths that make this degree distinctive within Britain and aligned with cultural and comparative studies in other countries, while increasing the access students have to other models of media studies through the bridges formed by core modules to fields of study in media and communications.

3. The examiner comments on the room for a wider range of assessment practice. It is possible that for reasons of distribution of modules for assessment that the examiner did not have a chance to see the full range of alternative assessments such as for instance the 'learning journal' in ARTF 3034 Trauma to Cultural Memory' or some of the uses of portfolio and archive projects. The teaching enhancement process is seeking to understand and expand the variety of assessments. Individual modules planned for the new core module in Keywords for the new degree is leading the way with varied forms of self-assessment and interim assessment. This point will be considered in relation to all new modules.

4. The examiner draws attention to weakness with regard to historical knowledge in some work. Historical understanding is written into our core level one modules and the historical runs through a number of modules. The erosion of historical knowledge and understanding is also highlighted within our modules, through the introduction of discussions of the cultural shifts in postmodernism and certain current cultural processes. The team is committed to developing acute historical awareness and reflexivity.

6. We welcome the acknowledgement of enhancements and innovations in the use of assessment and teaching methods. These models will be explored and expanded.

11. Re Module Handbooks. The School has already implemented a template which has been put into action this academic year in order to ensure the comparability of module handbooks and a new programme handbook for the Cultural and Media Studies degree has been created. The recommendation to align module information and ensure correct sequencing of material under Learning Resources will be taken up by the CMS to ensure orderliness and consistency on the VLE.

12. Exam scrutiny will now take place and the agree papers will be sent to the External Examiner.

13. The school continues to allow staff the choice of feedback via Grademark and paper formats. Discussion will be held by the CMS team to see if we can upload the material from the paper feedbacks to that the external examiner will have equal access to feedback. Feedback varies according to the need to supply the student with clear commentary on their performance and potential directions for improvement. It is a paradox that the weaker the student the longer the feedback to provide frameworks for their development.

15. The examiner expressed concern about the numerical boundaries used for the award of degree classes. This is not in the remit of the School but University policy and it functions across the board. The issue may be forwarded to the University.

16. Mitigating Circumstances: We follow the University's code of practice. The comments do not make it clear what the differences are. But the School accords with standard university procedures.

Head of School

3.10.2015