

**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, Faculty of Environment
Subject(s):	<i>Geography</i>
Programme(s) / Module(s):	BSc Geography
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	BSc

**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*

There are no matters that require 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 are appropriate for 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.*

As I stated in my report last year, the programme and the associated ILOs are consistent with the national subject benchmark (QAA 2007). The BSc curriculum offers a good balance between subject specific learning, discipline-specific skills and more generic skills. The curriculum has been carefully designed and is generally well integrated. There is clear progression through the degree, and an appropriately portfolio of interesting and challenging courses.

**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.*

Overall there is clear evidence of careful balancing of assessment against programme ILOs, particularly in relation to the core elements of the degree (tutorials and data analysis elements at L1, Skills for Physical Geographers module at L2, Dissertation at L3).

The range of assessment types is impressive, and there are some very good examples of innovative coursework and mixes of assessment types within modules. There is quite a heavy reliance on coursework relative to examinations (see 'other comments').

I was asked specifically to look at the assessment of GEOG2085 Ecosystems. The internal exam system (marking and moderation) had thrown up some questions about low marks for one of the assessment elements, specifically the Biomonitoring Report (which returned only four marks higher than 65%). Although the overall course statistics were not out of line for the course as a whole, marks for the Semester 1 assessment element (the Carbon report) were significantly higher than for the Semester 2 element (the biomonitoring report). The latter is a technical coursework exercise assessed by a set of short answer questions. Assessment for the Biomonitoring Report differed from the Carbon Report in using a highly structured, prescriptive mark scheme. After looking through most of the student reports I found that the marking of the report was fair, in that students either answered the questions acceptably as defined in the scheme (and were therefore awarded the marks) or they did not. I also looked at a sub-sample of then Carbon reports, and found that student attainment on this element was strong relative to the Biomonitoring Report. Overall, I conclude that the marks awarded for the reports (both Carbon and Biomonitoring) were appropriate. However, the course team will wish to look at the balance in difficulty between the two elements, and in particular the very specific assessment requirements of the Biomonitoring Report. This is a challenging exercise and the very prescriptive nature of the marking scheme may be a factor in restricting student attainment.

I was also asked to look at the moderation of the Research Placement Module, in which some marks were adjusted by the moderator. I found that these adjustments were well justified against the assessment criteria and were appropriate. I concur with the final moderated marks for the course. Overall this course showed very strong student achievement.

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.*

The range of assessment types, and the balancing of these against ILOs, provides clear opportunity for students to demonstrate their achievement against both programme aims and individual ILOs.

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.*

The BSc curriculum is still relatively new, and there had been no major changes since 2013-14. My main comment is that in the move to 20 credit modules, it is clear that some courses are amalgamations of previous 10 credit units, and that some team taught courses are better integrated and coherent than others. The GEOG2085 issue above is an example of where imbalance is still occurring. After three years operation of the curriculum the course team could usefully review the structures of individual course units, and this is an issue the external examiner could help look at in the 2015-16 visit.

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.*

As you would expect from a research led institution, the curriculum is strongly influenced by the research strengths of the department and student research is embedded within the curriculum through the second year 'Skills for Physical Geographers' course', the dissertation and through fieldwork experiences with a significant research element. There is clear evidence of students being exposed to the School's research within third year modules.

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**

Not applicable this year

#### 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.*

The information provided by both the University and School on my role, powers and responsibilities was clear and accessible.

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

**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 provided with draft examination papers for comment in a timely and organised manner, and there is clear evidence that my comments on these were considered and acted on where appropriate. I found the nature and level of examination questions appropriate, and my comments were predominantly matters of detail. I commented in last year's report that, in common with other departments I am familiar with, arrangements for external scrutiny or approval of coursework assignments are less well defined. Coursework titles and associated materials were not explicitly sent out to me for prior approval or comment, but the systems at Leeds does allow external examiners to see coursework assignments through the VLE. However, given that assessment for many of the courses (particularly at level 3) is dominated by coursework more consideration needs to be given to external scrutiny and approval of coursework for new modules or where significant changes are proposed to existing coursework arrangements on a module.

**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?**

The School provided full access to assessed and examined work, both coursework and examination scripts. The exam scripts I saw were generally clearly marked and annotated and provided confidence in the evaluation of the standard of student work.

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

As last year there was a very good range of subjects for dissertations, and these mapped appropriately on to both the module offerings through the degree and the established research strengths of the School. Dissertations seem relatively short and well-focused (compared to those I have seen at other institutions) and present as focused papers. This is an example of good practice, as the stronger dissertations present clear evidence of understanding of the research process and a critical perspective, whilst being accessible and focused. I looked at a range of dissertations and was reassured by the clarity of justifications provided for the marks awarded. Overall and across the dissertations I saw, I felt that the marks awarded for the dissertations were appropriate.

**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?**

The administrative arrangements throughout the process were excellent. Communications with the examination team were clear throughout the year. I was given a thorough briefing at the beginning of my visit to Leeds, and both academic and support staff were constantly available to answer questions and support my work in the School. The operation of the Board of Examiners was organised and professional, and I was satisfied with the Board's recommendation.

**16. 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**

- 1. As last year I commend the School on the excellent organisation of their examination system.** There is clearly a very strong team, and management and administration of examinations and assessments is undertaken with care and attention to detail, using strong and clear procedures.

2. I was again impressed with the transparency of the examination process to the external examiners. There is clear evidence that the School is responsive to external examiners' comments. Issues raised in previous external examiners reports had generally been considered and acted on where appropriate. Once again during my visit there was a good critical dialogue evident over curriculum and assessment matters, and importantly no sense of complacency.
3. The module assessment and moderation forms used by the School are excellent and a model of best practice. They provide very clear and explicit evidence of the assessment and moderation process. The consideration within these forms of student evaluation of the modules and of actions to enhance the modules for subsequent years is particularly notable.
4. Given the relatively recent changes to the curriculum, the assessment arrangements across both second and third year modules could usefully be reviewed by the examination team. In particular, some of the 'new' team taught 20 credit modules are effectively combinations of previous 10 credit modules, and I still have concerns over whether the assessments (and marks available) on these modules are balanced between the different elements of the 'new' modules. The GEOG2085 issue discussed above is an example.
5. The relative lack of first class degrees awarded on the BSc programme in comparison to the BA programme was noted again by the examination team. I looked closely at the first class and 2.1 dissertations and felt they had been marked appropriately, so do not consider that under marking of dissertations is the explanation for the relatively low number of first class degrees. I do note that in the substantive modules very few marks >80% are awarded, so performance at the very top end is restricted. The programme also contains a very heavy coursework burden. Typically on the BSc programme, students will have 14 assessment elements in year 3, but only two will be examinations. Assessment is therefore dominated by multiple coursework exercises and there is potentially a problem of 'reversion to the mean', making it difficult for the very best students to obtain high marks across all modules. Staff certainly need to be encouraged to award the very best coursework marks in the high 80s and 90s (i.e. if the answer to the question 'what more could reasonably be expected from this assignment' is 'not much' then consider a mark in the 90s). The course team may also wish to consider fuller use of examinations within the programme assessment.
6. The external examiners were given an opportunity to talk to a cohort of the students in May, rather than during their visit for the exam board in June. This was extremely welcome, as a larger number of students were able to attend. The meeting took the form of a Skype call, and although there were some technical issues the meeting was extremely valuable. The students we spoke to were extremely proud to be studying in the School, and were excellent advocates for the quality of the teaching provision and the overall student experience at Leeds. They were very explicit in their views that communications between the School and students were excellent, that they felt engaged with the School and that their views on teaching matters were listened to and (where appropriate) acted on. The staff-student committee structure in the School is clearly working very well. The students did raise two key areas of concern: (i) inconsistent advice and input from tutors and (ii) inconsistent feedback.
7. The students we met reported that the levels of support they received from tutors varied and was inconsistent. They reported that some tutors had the reputation of not supporting students well, for instance in dissertation support, and that subsequently students were selecting topics for dissertation study in order to try to get the 'best' advisor, rather than because they were interested in a particular topic. Although we only talked to a sub-set of students, who may not be representative, these reports should obviously be of concern to the School.
8. The students also raised the issue of inconsistent feedback on their work, both in terms of the quantity and quality of the feedback they received and that some feedback was very slow in being returned. They reported this as a matter of very significant frustration. I also note that the NSS 'feedback' score for Geography at Leeds was 63<sup>rd</sup> out of 68 Geography departments. In my report last year I noted that

the manner in which feedback is returned to students (e.g. coursework feedback) is inconsistent between modules, some being by paper forms (of varying types and with varying detail of comment), some electronically, and some using the gradebook facility of BlackBoard. I recommended then that Board of Examiners review the current 'mixed economy' of coursework feedback procedures and encourage much fuller use of the online gradebook feedback system within BlackBoard. I am pleased that the examination team reported that monitoring feedback and encouraging the use of online feedback is the focus of considerable attention, but **the quality and timeliness of feedback to students on their work clearly remains a serious issue for the School.**

School of Geography  
University of Leeds  
Leeds LS2 9JT



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

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October 16<sup>th</sup> 2015

Dear <<>>

**Head of School response to the BSc External Examiner's Report**

I am writing to express, on behalf of the School, my thanks for your work as external examiner on our BSc programmes this year. The role you play in ensuring we deliver a high quality education in Physical Geography is appreciated by everyone here.

We are pleased that you find our curriculum to be well designed, appropriately challenging and research led, and that it is accompanied by a high quality and transparent examination process. You note no issues that require urgent attention, but have identified a number of issues for us to consider further. I would like to take this opportunity to advise you how we are responding to these issues.

1. The principal problem you identified related to the timeliness and quality of feedback to students. With respect to feedback timing, we have implemented a system in which all marks must be entered to Gradebook and then will be released automatically on the 15<sup>th</sup> working day following the assessment deadline. With the exception of tutorial work, students will not receive marks earlier than this, and staff have been instructed that marks must be available for release at that time, or that they must communicate clearly to students when marks and feedback will be available. Our aim is that this overcomes issues of inconsistency and uncertainty in timing of feedback. Addressing feedback quality and consistency of mode of provision is more challenging; in this regard we are: (a) encouraging staff to mark electronically – there is increasing uptake of e-marking in the School but we cannot impose this practice (The University and Unions are currently in discussion over e-marking practice) which also constrains for the time being the movement away from the 'mixed economy' of feedback procedures that you identify; and (b) we are reinforcing the 'mark to the criteria' message amongst staff.
2. You felt we are over-assessing in the final year, with an over-reliance on coursework relative to examinations, thus generating a 'reversion to the mean' effect. We have taken steps to reduce the total number of coursework components (and have implemented a process for ensuring these are more evenly spread through the year) and will consider the merits of rebalancing the assessment portfolio towards examinations.
3. You raised the issue of some two-semester modules being amalgamations of previous 10 credit modules, which lack integration as a result of being merged. Our new BSc programme manager and Director of Undergraduate Studies are reviewing modules in this respect. You cited the GEOG2085 Ecosystems module specifically; this module was in fact designed as a 20 credit module, but we agree there is an imbalance in that assessment for half the module (the bio-monitoring report, which we

asked you to look at) was overly prescriptive. This was intended to give the students clear guidance on what was required in the assessment, but it is evidently too dissimilar to the companion assessment (carbon report) – the staff on this module are redesigning the assessment accordingly to ensure greater balance. We welcome your offer to look at the balance and integration of two semester modules as part of your 2015-16 visit.

4. You indicated that more consideration needs to be given to external scrutiny and approval of coursework for new modules or where significant changes are proposed to existing coursework arrangements on a module. For new BSc modules we are happy to provide you with copies of the module proposal (which indicate the nature of assessment). Once new modules are approved, or where there are substantial changes to existing assessments, we are similarly happy to seek your views on the suitability of the proposed assessment. Note that, given that our curriculum review has only just now run its first cycle, and point (2) above regarding a pressure to move towards more examinations, I anticipate the requirement for any such external scrutiny of new or significantly different coursework would be modest.
5. You commented on the relative lack of first class degrees awarded in comparison to the BA programme, which you felt could be due to: (a) a lack of mark stretch at the top end and (b) a very heavy coursework burden. With respect to (a) we are likely to introduce in AY16/17 a discontinuous mark scheme across the School – you will recall that the BA external examiner reported that this had the effect in his Department of bringing about a wider spread of marks, and more stretch at the top end; with respect to (b) – see point 2 above. We are also examining the statistics more closely with respect to this issue – we note that at classification, more BA students receive their double weighting for the final year, than year 2, whereas at BSc there is a higher proportion of students being classified where year 2 and 3 are equally weighted. This suggests that relative to BA students, the BSc students do not display as much of an upward trajectory through the final two years. We are not clear at this stage why this may be so – it could be a cohort effect, or a product of higher entry grades at BA.
6. From your Skype meeting with students you raised the potential problem of varied and inconsistent support from tutors. This is something that we are aware of, but do find difficult to tackle. We do remind staff of Professional Standards, and expectations of them, and more prosaically, we have minimum requirements (e.g. re dissertation support) but implementing a more equitable quality of support is proving difficult. We will consider this further in our management and School fora, and would of course be pleased to hear any practical suggestions you might offer.

Notwithstanding the specific points above, we are pleased that your report is overall very positive. With your assistance we hope to raise our standards further, and look forward to your visit next year.

Yours sincerely

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Head of School