

**The University of Leeds**  
**EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT**  
**ACADEMIC YEAR: 2014– 2015**

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

<i>Faculty / School of:</i>	School of Fine Art, History of Art & Cultural Studies
<i>Subject(s):</i>	MA in Fine Art
<i>Programme(s) / Module(s):</i>	All modules that constitute the programme.
<i>Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):</i>	MA

**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 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*

No

**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*



**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 ILOs and course structure are appropriate for taught postgraduate level. Students embark on a programme of research and learning that is independently structured and supported by close supervision as well as complimentary taught elective modules, including a dissertation. This culminates in the degree show – a presentation of each student's original contribution to research in the field of contemporary art practice.

**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.*

The aims and ILOs align both with FHEQ M Level and QCF Level 7 in England, Wales & Northern Ireland. This is equal to Level 7 of the EAF, the European subject benchmark. The aims and ILOs compare favourably with other reputable European HEIs in this field.

**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 design and structure of the assessment methods***

Assessment methods are rigorous, fair and clearly communicated to students.

***The quality of teaching, learning***

The practical and theoretical work of students is of a high standard and this is indicative both of the quality of learning and teaching and of students' peer learning. Students apply themselves well. They are ambitious and inventive in their research and studied in the resolution of their work.

Students were highly appreciative of the quality of teaching and supervision. They praised the wide range of optional modules available to them as MA students. They were very complimentary of the stimulating and productive relationship between Fine Art, Art Historical and Cultural Studies modules that comprise their programme.

Students praised the additional, flexible, support given by the staff and were very complimentary about the amount of contact they had.

**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.*

### **Academic Standards:**

The students performed very well. Standards were as high as comparable HE programmes in other Russell Group institutions at Level 7. Aims and ILOs now benefit from rewriting and annual revision.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses:**

The students continue to come from a variety of backgrounds. They are very engaged artists who form vital networks in and around the North of England. This knowledge and experience is one of the MA's strongest assets. It is crucially important, in this sense, to recruit a core group of artists from Leeds, Yorkshire and the North. I have suggested (below) how to do this. The overall size of the cohort has dwindled alarmingly in the past year, with a high number of applicants failing to convert. Given that peer learning is so important to art education, this threatens the student experience.

There could be a number of reasons for the steep decline in conversion (all familiar from my own experience): a lack of scholarships/loans for taught PG students, the removal of professional development funding for FE-sector staff, a funding gap between available scholarships/loans and higher fees now charged for the MA, competition from other MA programmes, the burden of undergraduate debt due to the privatisation of UG education in England, inadequate conversion activities in the University of Leeds, etc. Some of these factors can be rectified by the University of Leeds, others are politically inspired. Conversion activity is certainly hindered within the School of Fine Art, History of Art & Cultural Studies since the number of Fine Art BA students has grown considerably while Fine Art staffing has flatlined. The staff:student ratio in the School of Fine Art, History of Art & Cultural Studies is now very imbalanced. Student numbers in Art History and Cultural Studies have fallen, giving them a much more favourable staff:student ratio than in Fine Art (where staff are considerably overstretched). Where staff in History of Art & Cultural Studies retire or leave for another post, it would make sense to replace them with new staff in *Fine Art*.

The PG funding situation is set to change again. Given that the UK Government are proposing to introduce taught PG student loans in England, it seems opportune to undertake some competitor analysis to inform the future development of the MA programme. The Leeds MA has a valued reputation for academic rigour and, I would argue, is the obvious choice in north of England for BA art students who intend to transition to PhD. It might, therefore, be worth investigating how the MA could be positioned as the only '1+2' route to a Fine Art PhD within the White Rose College of the Arts & Humanities AHRC Consortium for EU students (where a student registers simultaneously for an MA and PhD and is helped to make an application to the AHRC as part of their programme). The quality and balance of theory and studio work at Leeds is exemplary and it is the only PhD Fine Art programme in Yorkshire with prospective AHRC funding; these facts should be widely promoted through websites such as Art & Education. It's essential that the MA is positioned correctly as a premier research preparation programme within the rapidly shifting taught PG market.

To this end, I have also mooted the possibility of the Leeds MA forming part of a European MA in Artistic Research. This would require establishing a network and validating an MA programme with a group of European partners via ERASMUS. The MA and PhD in Fine Art are already popular for incoming ERASMUS students. Why not formalise this in the form of a programme?

### **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.*

Programme Aims and ILOs continue to benefit from revision and review.

Tutorials continue to be clearly timetabled with no gaps in provision.

### **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.*

Staff research on art theory and printed matter is very evident in the work that MA students produce. The history and cultural studies modules are very clearly composed around staff specialist research (in some cases, perhaps *too* evidently). The 'studio' modules are more openly supportive of the student's own learning agreements, as is the norm in art education.

In light of what I have written about the cohort size, it *might* be worth considering how the MA programme could develop more specific practice-based research projects that involve students directly in staff research. Such projects might be shared with undergraduates provided PG's contributions were examined at Level 7 (i.e. MA students should be able to audit undergraduate learning and teaching). This could be a good approach to adopt – it is indicative of 'postgraduateness' and, in sharing resources with the undergraduate programmes, would generate a better pedagogy for the MAs. Given the size of the MA cohort, it may make sense to share resources in this more collegiate way. There is no reason why such an approach could not mix with the more conventional 'unstructured' approach found in the studio modules (especially following the 2016 move to the single campus 'Geography' building on University Road).

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

The programme is not part of an integrated '1+2' PhD within the context of the White Rose Grad School, but, as I have already argued here, it would be a good idea to consider how it might be in future as this could be very valuable to student recruitment.

**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, it was, thank you.

**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?**

Yes and Yes

**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 all of the work.

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

Yes. It was, again, of a very high standard.

**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

**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 for

Students are now finding it easy to access all facilities and have excellent studio provision. This will improve furthermore with the move into the new School building in 2016.

Students continue to be keen to see the programme more integrated with the Leeds artworld. They saw this as a means of improving graduate retention in the face of a perceived Londoncentrism. It might make sense to establish a permanent knowledge exchange just for the MA with an organisation in Leeds/Yorkshire. This would provide a unique selling point for the programme and give the students invaluable professional experience.

One student with learning difficulties experienced great difficulty accessing learning support (specifically for proofreading). It seems that this was compounded by new rules that delayed payments from Student Finance England leading to frustration. The student in question gave up trying to access this support and thus has now had to apply for mitigating circumstances. This seems to me to be unacceptable. Such support should be available to all students who request it. I realise that these are political pressures that originate externally, but I hope that the University of Leeds can put measures in place to ensure that the impact is not as draconian as the UK Government intend.



28 October 2015

Dear

Thank you for your extensive and informative report for the MA in Fine Art programme for the 2014-15 session.

The School is once again delighted to hear the students' positive response to the quality of teaching and amount of flexible contact that they received during their time on the programme. We are also encouraged by their comments reflecting on the range of option modules available and the 'stimulating and productive' relationship arising from this array between the cohorts of the different School disciplines.

However, the drop in application conversions over the past two years is, as you state, a major concern for the School and we are having ongoing discussions as how best to approach and resolve this issue such as providing specialist programmes that may relate to our new research centre (Artists' Writings & Publications), cross-programme pathways, and/or modules that will make full use of the interdisciplinary potential that exists within our teaching and research; to attract students that are willing to participate in a critical and theoretical engagement of practice; to create links across the region with external partners and resources in developing learning and teaching, professional practice and postgraduate research opportunities.

We are extremely grateful for the numerous options that you have pinpointed as possible ways forward, particularly the '1+2' MA/PhD structure that may be accessed through our unique practice-led position within the WRoCAH/AHRC consortium, and our participation in a proposed joint European MA in Artistic Research. This latter suggestion would build upon our already extensive UG presence in Europe and, as you note, we have already successfully hosted Erasmus students at TPG and PGR level for single semester periods of study.

In respect of our current small cohort, we have already taken steps to integrate the MAFA with our BAFA students through the weekly group crit programme and in offering the

option to hold the final exhibition together in June, rather than September, leaving July and August to concentrate solely on researching and writing the Dissertation. Integration in order to provide a satisfactory learning experience could be extended by combining our Level 3 and M Level studio modules, as already occurs on a number of our Art History and Critical Theory options, the Masters student receiving additional contact and support in respect of their higher module credit weighting.

All of these many other avenues are currently being discussed by the Fine Art team and in consultation with colleagues across the School and we will keep you fully informed of any proposed amendments, changes or additions to the Fine Art provision at TPG level. The issues surrounding academic and technical staffing in light of the overall increase in Fine Art student FTEs at UG, TPG and PGR levels combined is at the forefront of these discussions, especially in view of the move to a new building that has a limited capacity.

Thank you once again for your supportive comments and advice and we look forward to seeing you at an interim visit in the Spring.

Yours Sincerely,

Head of School