

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>River Basin Dynamics and Management with GIS MSc</i>
Programme(s) / Module(s):	GEOG5670M Issues and Skills for River Basin Dynamics and Management GEOG5680M Hydrological Processes and Analysis GEOG5830M Environmental Assessment GEOG5690M Masters Work-based Project GEOG5530M River Basin Management for Water Quality GEOG5280M Dissertation for River Basin Dynamics and Management
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	MSc / PgD

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. Furthermore I was, very helpfully given ALL previous External Examiners' reports dating back to AY2005/2006. This was really helpful in seeing how the programme had developed.

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 Intended Learning Outcomes are appropriate to the programme and challenge students in a positive manner. Standards are appropriate for an MSc and provide the necessary background for further postgraduate study or employment in industry.

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.*

In my experience the aims and Intended Learning Outcomes are comparable to other HEIs and students receive appropriate advanced level training.

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 programme is well structured and offers students the choice of two complimentary pathways, concentrating on either river basin processes or more on GIS skills; but still retains common core skills. Marking standards seem appropriate for the work that I looked at this year. In particular I reviewed three dissertations, one at the merit/distinction boundary, one at the pass/merit boundary and a failed project. All were appropriately classified and the marks were generally well supported by the initial assessors' comments and/or clearly reconciled in the joint assessment. Feedback to student is generally detailed and of high quality but it is worth just keeping an eye on the assessment criteria to ensure that the general feedback corresponds to the rubric of the assessment criteria, particularly when justifying marginal marks.

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.*

I briefly reviewed the mark distributions (9 students) in the core modules (GEOG5670M Issues and Skills in River Basin Dynamics and Management and GEOG5280M Dissertation in River Basin Dynamics and Management). Based on this snapshot of the 2014/15 cohort the range in the GEOG5670M only varied between 60-72 (a narrow range) and for the dissertation (GEOG5280M) although the range was greater (44-73) I note few really very good marks (none in the 80+ class) and a tail of weaker performances including one fail. I note the lack of very high dissertation marks has been noted in previous external examiners comments e.g. 2012/13. I am sure these issues must have been considered as there appears to be a rigorous marks moderation procedure in place.

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.

This was my first year as External Examiner so my previous knowledge is based on the outgoing examiners' report and school response. The comments of the External appear to have been actioned by the School.

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.

It is clear there are some excellent examples of research-led teaching embedded in the various modules and these are also reflected to some extent in the dissertation topics. This is a good feature because it makes teaching at the MSc level much closer to the research frontier and as a consequence more rewarding for students and staff alike.

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.

Although I received some materials/documentation in advance of my first visit and everyone at Leeds was extremely helpful in responding to requests for additional information it would be useful if the programme team prepared a checklist of materials to be made available to the External Examiner 'On Appointment' and 'Each Year'. This should include things like a compendium of relevant materials/documents, mark sheets and clear directions on how to find and navigate online resources.

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.

The availability of the online VLE system for coursework and accessing assignments is a great asset. However, it is an asset that the External Examiner (and others) cannot fully embrace for two reasons: (1) For an external user (even one with experience of use of Blackboard) navigating to relevant resources is tricky (some additional guidance is needed here); and (2) online feedback to students is not provided consistently across modules so there is a mixture of online electronic feedback and handwritten feedback. Hosting all feedback on the VLE would be much better as this provides a permanent easily accessible archive of material across all modules and is something which is valued by students. The infrastructure is in place - so why not use it?

Recommendation: Move to a system that requires ALL staff to return feedback electronically online.

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?

The MSc is assessed exclusively by coursework. No drafts of these assessments were sent to the External Examiner.

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?

Generally, yes - but see recommendation regarding online provision of assessed work and marking details / feedback.

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

My experience of dissertation on the MSc programme is very limited but based on my first cursory look it seems that the structure and purpose of the dissertation projects could be better focused, often requiring a clearer conceptual framework for the research and well specified (critically framed) objectives. There were also some minor points of presentation that detracted from the work e.g. minor errors on graphics, use of default EXCEL formats, inappropriate scale of Figures, use of appendices, etc. It would be useful to know what guidance is given to students before they embark on their dissertations (is there a dissertation handbook?) and whether the feedback from other report writing exercises feeds in to improvements in the dissertation. Given the MSc relies exclusively on report writing for assessment it is perhaps a little surprising that dissertations are not perhaps a little more polished. Please take this as an early observation as my experience of the programme to date is very limited.

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?

Administration arrangements were satisfactory and I attend the Board of Examiners. The Board meeting was conducted efficiently and was fair to all candidates. No major issues were identified with the MSc River Basin students. I was satisfied with the procedures and that appropriate final classifications / recommendations had been made.

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

I was not made aware of any mitigating circumstances.

Other comments

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

This is my first year as External Examiner for the River Basin Dynamics and Management with GIS so my report will be fairly brief. Firstly I have enjoyed getting to grips with the programme structure and content. The administration and teaching staff associated with the programme have been very welcoming and helpful in responding to requests for information. The MSc was known to me before being asked to be External Examiner and has an established reputation for its distinct character and high quality. It is clear from my initial impressions that the programme has great depth and variety; a wide scope of themes; provides a sound foundation in the process understanding of river basins; and provides an excellent skills base in GIS, quantitative analysis and numerical methods. The reliance on coursework to assess the work is wholly appropriate and developing report writing skills (in several formats), which is implicit in this approach is very useful.



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

School of Geography
University of Leeds
West Yorkshire
LS2 9JT

23/11/2015

Dear

External examination of MSc River Basin Processes and Management with GIS

We are writing to thank you for your external examiner's report for the 2014/15 River Basin Processes and Management with GIS programme. Your insightful and constructive comments on the programme are very much appreciated and included, in brief:

- Confirmation that the programme has great depth and variety; a wide scope of themes; provides a sound foundation in the process understanding of river basins; and provides an excellent skills base in GIS, quantitative analysis and numerical methods. The reliance on coursework to assess the work is wholly appropriate and developing report writing skills (in several formats), which is implicit in this approach is very useful.
- The Intended Learning Outcomes are appropriate to the programme and challenge students in a positive manner. Standards are appropriate for an MSc and provide the necessary background for further postgraduate study or employment in industry.
- The aims and Intended Learning Outcomes are comparable to other HEIs and students receive appropriate advanced level training.
- The programme is well structured and offers students the choice of two complimentary pathways, concentrating on either river basin processes or more on GIS skills; but still retains common core skills.
- Marking standards seem appropriate, and samples of work assessed were appropriately classified and the marks were generally well supported by the initial assessors' comments and/or clearly reconciled in the joint assessment. Feedback to students is generally detailed and of high quality (though you note it is worth just keeping an eye on the assessment criteria to ensure that the general feedback corresponds to the rubric of the assessment criteria, particularly when justifying marginal marks).
- Mark distributions in the core modules only varied between 60-72 (a narrow range) and 44-73 for Issues and Skills and Dissertation respectively, with very good marks (none in the 80+ class) and a tail of weaker performances including one fail (and a lack of very high dissertation marks, as has been noted in previous external examiner's comments e.g. 2012/13). Nevertheless, there appears to be a rigorous marks moderation procedure in place.
- You identified some excellent examples of research-led teaching embedded in the various modules and these are also reflected to some extent in the dissertation topics, stating this is a good feature because it makes teaching at the MSc level much closer to the research frontier and as a consequence more rewarding for students and staff alike.
- It would be useful if the programme team prepared a checklist of materials to be made available to the External Examiner 'On Appointment' and 'Each Year'. This should include things like a

compendium of relevant materials/documents, mark sheets and clear directions on how to find and navigate online resources.

- All staff should mark using Gradebook so that everything is available online and particular items (e.g. module handbooks) should be located in the same place for each module.
- The structure and purpose of the dissertation projects could be better focused, often requiring a clearer conceptual framework for the research and well specified (critically framed) objectives. There were also some minor points of presentation that detracted from the work e.g. minor errors on graphics, use of default Excel formats, inappropriate scale of figures, use of appendices, etc. It would be useful to know what guidance is given to students before they embark on their dissertations (is there a dissertation handbook?) and whether the feedback from other report writing exercises feeds in to improvements in the dissertation. Given the MSc relies exclusively on report writing for assessment it is perhaps a little surprising that dissertations are not perhaps a little more polished.
- Administration arrangements were satisfactory. The Board of Examiners meeting was conducted efficiently and was fair to all candidates. No major issues were identified with the MSc River Basin students and appropriate final classifications / recommendations had been made.

Based on your recommendations we will pursue the following actions:

- Dissertation students will receive a clear introductory lecture and regular checking of their progress by the module convenor (in addition to supervisors) via email and subsequent face to face meetings (including personal tutorials) if required. For the 2016/17 session we will introduce a dissertation proposal and interim report which will both be pass to progress and allow further formative feedback from supervisors.
- We will put together a list of documents to be provided to the external examiner on appointment and each year.
- We will move to marking entirely using Gradebook, make sure that feedback links clearly to assessment criteria, and stretch marks where possible.

Based on other feedback (e.g. internal review, student feedback) we also aim to:

- Make sure that each student receives personal tutoring.
- Increase the involvement of other staff in the programme.
- Increase the amount of fieldwork.
- Improve marketing of the course.

Thank you once again for your enthusiastic scrutiny and considerate work. Your input into the examination process at Leeds is greatly appreciated.

Yours sincerely,

Head of School.