

## 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>	Faculty of Environment/School of Earth & Environment
<i>Subject(s):</i>	MSc Sustainability (Environment and Development) MSc Sustainability (Environmental Politics and Policy) MSc Sustainability (Climate Change)
<i>Programme(s) / Module(s):</i>	SOEE5020M Research Project SOEE4881M Introduction to Sustainability SOEE5472M Environmental Policy and Governance SOEE5483M Critical Perspectives on Environment and Development SOEE5595M Environment - Development Overseas Field Course SOEE5561M Climate Change Mitigation SOEE5540M Climate Change Physical Science SOEE5550M Climate Change Impacts and Adaptation (available Terrestrial Biosphere 5970)
<i>Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):</i>	MSc

**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

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## 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?*

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

**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.*

I have similar comments as last year - the programmes I reviewed had clearly communicated aims and covered appropriate content for the subject. The ILOs for the modules reviewed were appropriate for MSc level and the intended mechanisms by which students would achieve these were clear. Overall, programmes were logically structured, with an appropriate mix of core and optional modules. Students also had an opportunity to undertake an independent research project and for those on the Environment and Development programme, a related field trip, which was clearly of value to those students in allowing them to ground learning and enhance potential employability.

**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

**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.*

There was a good range of assessment types across the modules, affording students the opportunity to show their learning - these methods were appropriate to the module ILOs and, together with assessment criteria, were clearly communicated to students via the module handbooks. Overall there was balance and consistency in the marking applied, with a full range of marks used. There was transparency in the arrangements for moderation and marking in relation to the classifications.

Based on the evaluation forms provided by students, I inferred that students were generally positive about the quality of teaching that they had received, that overall learning needs were addressed and they were clearly appreciative of the efforts of staff to provide participatory engagement and a range of teaching approaches.

The module Introduction to sustainability was adjusted last year to provide greater delivery at the start of the academic year in order to help students develop grounding in the key ideas and the early assessment became a formative piece of work to support this learning. It is always difficult to find the perfect solution and there will always be some students who will struggle with critical theory, especially those for whom it is the first encounter with the approaches or learning style and therefore will need time to assimilate the information. Overall there was positive feedback from students about the new format, and acceptance from most that this early learning was central to moving forward with their programme. The information provided to students was clear and excellent detailed feedback was provided. Although the mean grade was still low last year, this might be expected for a foundation module. A range of work and those with fails, high or borderline grades were reviewed. I agreed with the grades given – there was a transparent process of marking and moderation. The delay in feedback for some work associated with this module was clearly a concern to students and hopefully the system would have mechanisms to support staff in these circumstances in the future. It might be worth considering a supplementary write up associated with the group work to help weight the group marks which can help increase the spread of marks.

Critical perspectives had consistent and useful feedback online and the module convenors were planning to respond to further student feedback, such as a helpful workshop on comparing empirical work to prepare for essay. A selection from the two assessments was reviewed; I found the grading to be fair and instructions had been fully provided to the students.

It was useful to see the model answers for the Environmental policy and governance assignments – a selection of coursework and exam scripts was reviewed and I found the marking consistent and fair.

Climate Change Mitigation has positive student feedback regarding the contemporary nature of the debates, such as the climate change negotiation workshop. A selection of work from the short and long paper was reviewed. Some of the students found critical reflections difficult and there were indications that sessions were provided/will be provide to support students in how to write academic papers to improve the marks – although it wasn't clear if this was provided to all students in SEE as part of the personal skills training.

Students had actively used the online feedback provided in Climate change Physical Science – again a selection of work was reviewed, and the high average for the research paper write up was explained on the marking form. It was noted on the marking form that a proportion of the class did not regularly attend class in person because of video capture which strikes me as a challenge in terms of the benefits of learning through direct communication with the instructor and in communicating general policy and expectations, and I wasn't sure if this was limited to just this module. It did not seem to have affected the grades for this module however.

Climate change impacts and adaptation had experienced some difficulties in the past but last year this seemed to have improved due to the redesign of the assessment. Students did not comment on a disjointed module as in the year before either. There was a better spread of marks last year for both the essay and the group project. A selection of essays and projects was reviewed. While many of the students found the science challenging most recognised that a basic

knowledge was important to their wider understanding, and there were good online resources for the students. One student commented that they were “not a technical person but able to make sense of the science due to the teaching”.

There were some excellent projects undertaken for the Overseas field course in Tanzania and clear feedback online for students for the selection of work reviewed. The field course assignments provide a great opportunity for students to convert their learning into practice.

**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.*

Students had been given adequate opportunity to demonstrate their achievement of the aims and ILOs as noted above and these mechanisms are comparable to other courses in the area. The cohort demonstrated a range of ability based on their final category, with a few excellent students. It is challenging for international students and it is good that in addition to existing support, there was new support for students in the form of a professional 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.*

Environment and Development continues to be a strong programme with around 23 students and has maintained its clear identity. Climate Change and Environmental Politics and Policy had fewer students but this reflects the niche markets being targeted. The merging of Climate Change and Environmental Politics and Policy into a single degree is a sensible strategy. See comments above for question 1 regarding the programmes. Efforts had been made to remedy any issues with module from the previous year, in particular for Introduction to Sustainability and Impacts and Adaptation detailed above in question 2. The student evaluations were more positive and the range of marks as expected this year.

**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.*

Based on the information provided in the module handbooks and each curriculum outlined, it was clear that many modules continued to incorporate a range of interesting examples from current research together with relevant case studies and illustrations from policy and practice. There were clearly efforts made to connect to the teaching and learning environment, offering students a way of relating theory and practice. The independent research project and overseas field course both provide opportunities for students to connect to research in practice themselves.

**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.*

The necessary information was available via the University of Leeds website. During the visit, <>, SEE Student Education Service Office, ensured that all materials were available as paper copies or new for this year mostly online. The new system was much easier for the examiners. <> was extremely helpful in answering questions and providing additional information. Key academic staff were also available to talk to better understand particular points.

**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.*

All appropriate documentation was available, or made available upon request. The materials were clearly organised (programme details, module handbooks, marks for modules, online information). Overall the system was transparent and the marking criteria clear. The online system change from student portfolios was much easier to use.

**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, module handbooks were available for the coursework element and question papers were available for examinations. The nature and level of questions were appropriate to the module, the expect content and level of an MSc student. A student dispute about the nature of one assignment was also reviewed and it was concluded that the information was made clear to all students and the assignment was appropriate.

**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 modules reviewed had tabular information about the student, their grades for components of the module, and the work relating to these components was available, mainly as e-copies online. This was an efficient system allowing the examiner to select a range of materials and borderline pieces of work. The feedback to the students was also clearly available.

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

The topics selected by programme students were relevant to their degree. The method and standard of assessment was this year fairly consistent and there were fewer 3<sup>rd</sup> marker required. This year all the markers and moderators comments were available online which was helpful. It is challenging to mark dissertations at the higher end of the spectrum and it might be useful for greater guidance to be provided to staff (relevant perhaps not just to dissertation marking – e.g. in some other universities step marking above 70 is used to encourage a clearer spread at the top end). Some interesting and well written dissertations.

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**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?**

I visited from evening 6<sup>th</sup> October, to be able to spend the 7<sup>th</sup> October reviewing materials and then on the 8<sup>th</sup> October to attend the Board of Examiners meeting in person. The meeting was well organised and I was satisfied with the recommendations made by the Board. There was sufficient opportunity to discuss any points that arose during the meeting. It was apparent that special cases due to mitigating circumstances had been given appropriate attention throughout the year.

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

Yes, all students with mitigating circumstances or medical evidence were highlighted (e.g. outstanding marks, issues of academic conduct, illness or extensions that were dealt with at the time) and due consideration given in the outcome as per the University rules. A couple of cases of academic discretion were discussed.

**Other comments**

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

All Universities face the challenge of returning assessment feedback to students in increasingly short timeframes, and while the feedback I reviewed was in general excellent, constructive and detailed, it will be important that SEE ensures that when feedback is likely to be returned late to students, there are mechanisms available in the school student office to identify the delay and provide solution or support for staff in marking to prevent future disputes from students. This is especially important for early formative work or when there are large numbers of assignments to be returned in a short time. The move to online feedback is certainly a useful tool for monitoring this process and providing timely and accessible feedback to students. With the shift to online marking it might become increasingly important to manage student expectations and consider how students will react to inconsistency, for example if inconsistency remains in feedback provided (some academics provide feedback on documents online while others provide just the standard feedback sheets) – perhaps by updating guidance to students about feedback and what can reasonably be expected.

**School of Earth and Environment**

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**UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS**

07 December 2015

Dear

**Re: Response to External Examiner's Report - MSc Sustainability (Environment and Development); MSc Sustainability (Environmental Politics and Policy); MSc Sustainability (Climate Change); 2014-15**

I would like to express my sincere thanks to you for examining our MSc programmes for the last academic session. Your views are an essential part of our quality assurance mechanism and your input into our teaching processes is greatly valued.

I was very pleased to hear that you are satisfied with the overall quality of the Masters programmes and happy to hear you consider our programmes overall to be logically structured with an appropriate mix of core and optional modules. I was also happy to see that you appreciated our efforts to apply a good range of teaching assessment types for our students, to integrate research into learning and teaching across our programmes, and the fairness and transparency of our marking and moderation processes.

Your support of the enhancements to the programmes over the past year is greatly appreciated, for example the 'extra skills support tutorials' we provide in the early weeks of semester 1 to support new students (targeted particularly at international students and students returning to study), the adjustments to the Climate Change Impacts and Adaptation module, and the merging of the Climate Change and Environmental Politics & Policy programmes for 2015-16. In 2015-16 we are also trialling a new non-assessed personal development module (separate from the 'extra skills support tutorials') that aims to help students: 1) recognise and take advantage of available opportunities during the Masters degrees, 2) develop core skills for sustainability research and employability, 3) identify their core skills and learn techniques to market themselves effectively, 4) plan proactive transitions to employment within realistic expectations, and 5) develop general skills for the workplace. We look forward to receiving your feedback on that next year.

I was also very pleased that you were happy with the new administrative arrangements associated with the Masters programmes and that improved access to the online system

was helpful. I apologise however, that again, there was some limitation with regards to work space during your visit. Due to the timing of your visit, the rooms that were available for two continuous days were restricted. The meeting room provided for you allowed a secure, quite working environment, close to the student office which, it was felt, made a convenient location. However, for next year, we will endeavour to provide a different location.

I was thrilled to see that you consider there are currently no matters that require urgent attention, and appreciate the suggestions you have made for our consideration. I respond to each of these in turn below.

Firstly, we refer to your general note on the challenges of achieving a consistent approach to feedback and in ensuring the timeliness of feedback. In terms of monitoring and managing expectations with regard to the timeliness of return of feedback across the School we note that the School of Geography are currently trialling a controlled return of work by their student support office at set periods of time after submission (after 3 weeks). We hope to learn from experiences in the School of Geography as currently in the School of Earth & Environment feedback can be returned at any time by the module leader or the student support office with an expectation that this will be within the a 3 week period of submission. In terms of the consistency of approach to providing feedback (online/standard feedback sheets), the School of Earth & Environment has been encouraging staff to shift to online marking and return of feedback over a period of years. Colleagues in the School Student Education Service office are monitoring return times for coursework and will be discussing sharing good practice in feedback at the forthcoming Teaching Away Day.

In relation to specific modules:

**Research Project (SOEE5020M)** - We note your point about it being challenging to mark dissertations at the higher end of the spectrum and accept that it would be useful to develop greater guidance for staff. A project has recently been completed within the School and new advice on this for a variety of key assessment types (examinations, written assignments, oral presentations and technical reports) across both UG and Masters level has been completed. The Code of Practice on Assessment has been updated to communicate this new guidance to staff across the School. A copy of this is attached for your information.

**Introduction to Sustainability (SOEE5281M)** - We recognise the delay in feedback for some work associated with this module was a concern to students last year. This year, marking of the longer essay will be shared between two members of the module team, and students have been notified that marking of this assignment may take longer than expected, due to competing deadlines and heavy workloads at that time. In addition, two teaching fellows support the formative marking of the early assignment on this module. This relieves some pressure on the module leader and adds some resilience in terms of meeting deadlines. We also note your suggestion to include a supplementary write up associated with the group work to help weight the group marks. We are currently evaluating whether to include an additional supplementary task to the group work, although this has student workload implications, or whether to reduce the weighting of the group work and increase the weighting of the individual essay in the overall module mark.

**Climate Change Mitigation (SOEE5561M)** – You noted that this module requires some critical thinking exercises and that module included guidance on this, but you are not sure if

this was provided to all students on the programmes. Critical thinking and writing are skills that are covered in the 'extra skills support tutorials' offered to all Masters students on Sustainability Research Institute led Masters degrees in the early weeks of semester 1. There is also central university skills training on critical thinking and writing that our students can access through the university Library ([skills@library.leeds.ac.uk](mailto:skills@library.leeds.ac.uk)).

**Climate Change Physical Science** (SOEE5540M) – It is unclear last year why motivated students stopped attending and used lecture capture instead. It may have been class times and/or deadline assessment issues. This year we have gone to greater efforts to spread deadlines out across the semester and attendance doesn't seem to be a problem. We will continue to assess how lecture capture is being used.

We trust this response has comprehensively responded to your queries, responded to your very helpful suggestions and clarified our direction forwards. Thank you once again for your close scrutiny of our MSc programmes. We are very grateful for your encouragement and helpful critique. Your input to our programmes is making a positive difference.

Yours sincerely,

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