

# 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:	Environment / School of Earth & Environment
Subject(s):	
Programme(s) / Module(s):	MRes Climate & Atmospheric Science
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	MRes

#### 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*

. 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*

I have been External Examiner for this programme for four years now. In this time the programme has evolved substantially, from the original MRes Physics of Earth & Atmosphere, which incorporated a substantial solid earth / geosciences strand, to the current atmospheric / climate programme. This increased focus has undoubtedly increased the coherence of the programme and its teaching provision, leading to a tighter (and happier) student cohort, and removed a number of process-related niggles which previously arose in part from the breadth of content. However this sharpening comes at a potential cost of reduced market appeal, and indeed numbers recently have been relatively modest (this year, 6 students) - although noting that all taught

modules are offered elsewhere in the School's programmes, so the direct teaching overhead is modest. The programme achieves high standards of education and student achievement, appropriately assessed and marked, and remains the leading course UK-wide for post-BSc research training for students interested in PhD study in the physical atmospheric and climate sciences.

## 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 MRes Climate & Atmospheric Science programme provides research training and subject specific skills & knowledge for physical science and mathematics graduates in preparation for PhD study in Atmospheric Sciences, broadly interpreted. The programme structure incorporates taught components, fieldwork, research skills and a 90 credit research project (dissertation) component, with considerable flexibility over module choice to fit the interests and backgrounds of specific students.

The programme structure and content is essentially unchanged from the 2013-14 session, and remains appropriate for these aims. The standards set easily meet MRes level.

### 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.*

No national benchmark exists, but the programme is of an equivalent standard to related MSc programmes at other UK (Russell Gp) HEIs.

### 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.*

A range of assessment methods are used, including traditional examinations, coursework, seminar reports, fieldwork and a computer practical, alongside the written dissertation. For the major project, the initial proposal, literature review, written dissertation, oral and poster presentations are assessed. Marks awarded were very consistent between research and taught components giving confidence in the accuracy of assessment.

I attended the final project oral presentation and poster session for the 2014-15 cohort (5 students, plus one with mitigating circumstances not present). The research projects, and their presentation / write-ups, were of a high scientific level, indicating high quality instruction. It was good to see a substantial laboratory project amongst the more typical modelling and data-analysis activities; the School should aim to ensure this range of project types continue to be undertaken.

### 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 students demonstrated a good level of understanding of the underlying theoretical components of the course, and a particularly strong performance in the research project (reflecting the focus of the MRes course). As a cohort they are certainly comparable to and possibly stronger than MSc cohorts in comparable programmes I have experience of elsewhere (although in comparison with previous years I would rate this years Leeds cohort as slightly weaker). In discussion with the students it was notable that none were planning to undertake PhD study, a marked contrast to past cohorts.

### 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 was not made aware of substantial enhancements since the previous year.

Embedding students within research groups is an effective method of teaching research skills - and broader research culture - for those interested in ongoing (e.g. PhD) study.

### 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.*

The programme is very heavily influenced by current research, with the MRes student research project forming an original piece of research, taking place within the context of the research activities of the individual supervisor.

**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**

I have agreed to undertake mentoring duties in the near future

**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.*

Copies of coursework relating to the research components of the course (dissertation, literature review, computer project) were provided to me electronically ahead of the examination board.

**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: Provision of an updated Programme Handbook would be useful

**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?**

Draft examination papers were, I understand, reviewed within the EE arrangements for their parent programmes – no other bespoke assessments are specific to this programme alone.

**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?**

Sufficient work was made available. I was in agreement with the marks awarded.

Some dissertation assessments contained insufficient written feedback to justify the mark awarded, against the marking criteria, or of the process for agreement of marks between first and second supervisors (although in discussion with the programme director I was happy with the approach followed and outcomes reached). I would recommend the School establish a pro-forma for this, both to support the decision making process, and as a matter of record in the case of appeals etc.

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

Yes but note comment above re assessment / feedback.

**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 - I attended the final presentation session, met with the student and attended the final board of examiners.

**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**

I met with the current cohort independently, and received their feedback on the programme overall. The group (who I note are predominantly pursuing careers outside research) expressed satisfaction with the programme overall, and in particular with the fieldwork ("Arran") components, the research component and their participation in research groups, and the flexibility of the programme overall. They were also highly complimentary of the support received from the Programme Administrator,

One further comment related to timescales for return of marks and feedback, and variations in deadlines. The group also commented upon a need for wider recognition, in teaching staff across SEE, of the MRes programme and its somewhat distinct structure and assessment, where the students made up a small fraction of the cohort for a given module. Some tightening of procedural aspects could alleviate these issues for the incoming cohort.



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11 December 2015

Dear ,

**Re: Response to External Examiner's Report (MRes Climate and Atmospheric Science), 2014/15**

Many thanks for examining our MRes programme during the past academic session. The views of our external examiners are always an essential part of our quality assurance mechanism and we welcome your input into our teaching process.

We are delighted to read that you consider there are currently no matters requiring urgent attention, and appreciate the suggestions you have made for our consideration. We are pleased that the overall tone of your comments continues to be very positive and that you found the course design excellent and the dissertation projects to be well done. We will continue to strive for a diverse range of projects, as you observe more and more student projects are desk based rather than demonstrating practical skills that are still critical to atmospheric science research.

Firstly, thank you for your continued support for our MRes programme and your suggestions over the last four years have aided its position as a leading programme in climate and atmospheric science. As you say it continues to provide a robust pathway to further study. The School would also like to thank you for your very positive comments regarding the administration and core support of the course.

In response to the specific issues that you have raised:

***Provision of an updated Programme Handbook would be useful***

We will ensure that programme support materials such as handbook and marking criteria will be provided to examiners in the future.

***Some dissertation assessments contained insufficient written feedback to justify the mark awarded, against the marking criteria, or of the process for agreement of marks between first and second supervisors (although in discussion with the programme director I was happy with the approach followed and outcomes reached). I would recommend the School establish a pro-forma for this, both to support the decision making process, and as a matter of record in the case of appeals etc.***

With regards to the dissertations that were lacking in comments specifically tied to the marking criteria, we will ensure that all staff involved in marking have full guidance on the assessment process including evidence to support the mark given for work. We will adopt the first/second marking systems and marks sheets with criteria used in other areas of the school.

I would like to thank you once again for your support over the past four years as our External Examiner, your continued input into the development of our MRes programme has been invaluable. Finally, many thanks for agreeing to provide mentoring support the incoming examiner.

Yours sincerely,

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