

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 Earth and Environment
Subject(s):	<i>MSc Exploration Geophysics</i>
Programme(s) / Module(s):	Structure & Hydrocarbon Prospectivity of Basins Exploration Geophysics Time Series Analysis & Inversion Near Surface Geophysics Gravity and Magnetic Methods Generic Geophysics Skills Seismic Reflection Acquisition (Option A) Petrophysics and Geophysical Reservoir Evaluation Structure and Hydrocarbon Prospectivity of Basins Seismic Reflection Interpretation and Sequence Stratigraphy
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	MSc (one year full time)

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

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, Academic and Industry External Examiner reports and responses were provided for 2013-14 and 2012-13, and External Examiner reports without replies were provided for 2011-12. These were very helpful.

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

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.

Intended Learning Outcomes provide a vital common framework for Learners, Instructors and Examiners as well as other stakeholders such as potential employers. However, I have only found rather generic Learning Outcomes expressed at the Programme level in the Module and Programme catalogue. The Module Descriptions contain Module Objectives and Syllabus of varying quality such that it is difficult to form an opinion on the degree to which the

Intended Learning Outcomes have been assessed to a fair and high standard. I would therefore **recommend that the Programme Catalogue Module descriptions be reviewed and updated to include clear ILO's.**

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.*

I am not able to comment on this.

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.*

During the year I was sent, by email, a pdf version of each of the exam papers and invited to provide an opinion on fairness and standard. To do this I looked at the module objectives and provided a view, however, I found the module objective descriptions of variable quality. Please see note 1 on the need to improve ILO descriptions. Improved ILO descriptions would make it easier to form an opinion on the fairness/standard of assessment for each module ILO.

Students fed back that there were some inconsistencies in assessment, for example some short assignments carried equal weight to longer assignments. Students for whom English was not their first language felt disadvantaged in **the near surface exam as the time was short for the exam and the question took them a longer time to read than a native speaker.**

Students fed-back that the **course teaching was 'first rate'** and this is backed up by the module feedback forms for most courses, for example Gravity and Magnetic Methods had 42 (93%) response rate and average scores between 1 and 2 for 15 out of 16 questions. However, students fed-back **some concerns about the Seismic Reflection Interpretation and Sequence Stratigraphy module** which is reflected in the lower module feedback summary scores.

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 cohort consisted of 45 MSc Ex GP students plus 4 Pet GG students from Saudi Arabia. The 45 MSc Ex GP student intake is impressive with, 14 x 1st, 29 x 2.1 and 2 x 2.2 BSc degrees. Of this intake, 22 have a math, physics or engineering degree, 7 have a geology or geography degree and 16 have some combination, for example a geophysics degree. Exploration Geophysicists need to be able to deliver geophysical products to both numerical and geological standards. **Math, Physics and Engineering students fed back that they struggled with geological terminology.** A geology student fed back that he was OK with the level of Math as he had a Math A2 level (Math A2 level or equivalent should continue as a minimum course requirement).

5. For Examiners responsible for programmes that include clinical practice components, please comment on the learning and assessment of practice components of the curriculum

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.

On Thursday 9th <> and I had the opportunity to meet 14 out of 44 students face to face for a feedback session. Students fed back that they **liked the industry links** (connections, projects, visits (BP and Apache visits mentioned as good practice)), the broad exposure to industry software, staff engagement and the MSc programme leadership. They also **liked the recorded lectures which enabled them to revisit difficult topics and helped them revise for exams.** They were aware that steps had been taken to phase assignment deadlines and felt that this was working, though one student mentioned that this needed to be extended to include assignments that overlapped with Structural Geology and Geophysics.

Steps have been taken this year to enhance the quality of module feedback by using paper feedback forms. This has led to a higher response rate which reveals useful information on where to further improve courses. **This practice will help with continuous improvement of the programme if areas for improvement identified and actioned.**

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.

There were good examples of students summer projects being presented at research meetings.

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

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 not received mentor support, but I have had my questions answered when needed.

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.

Sufficient guidance material was provided.

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, links to online programme and module specifications were provided.

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, I was sent all examinations (email pdf) and given time to assess whether the questions were fair/to standard compared to Intended Learning Outcomes (though see comment 1 above).

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. On day one, I was provided with half the student projects and spent a day reading a sample of these. On day four I had access to marked exams and course-works. I also attended ten oral examinations as observer on Tuesday 8th and twelve presentations on Wednesday 9th.

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

The 'dissertation marking criteria' were clear and enabled consistent marking by the two assessors in most (26) cases and also agreed with my own independent assessment in a few sample cases. Where marks are more than 5% apart, they are reviewed by the two assessors or a third assessment sought. The subjects for dissertation were appropriate in most cases, with only two dissertation topics seeming to fall outside 'Exploration Geophysics' (if we take this to mean geophysics in petroleum exploration, development and production).

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?

Very efficient Board of Examiners meeting with information on both process and marks clearly available. I am satisfied with the recommendation which was 12 Pass, 21 Pass with Merit, 4 Pass with Distinction and 6 Deferred.

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

Currently the summer project module manager is the same person as the programme manager which leads to a high workload as the summer projects finish and the new programme starts and represents a programme manager succession risk. Five of the summer projects undertaken in industry were covered by confidentiality agreements. As an industry external examiner I am not able to sign confidentiality agreements. I therefore did not take part in the oral exam or presentations for projects covered by confidentiality agreements, these were covered by the Academic External Examiner.

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03 January 2016

Dear

**RE: Response to External Examiner's Report, MSc Exploration Geophysics
2014/15**

I would like to express my sincere thanks to you for examining our MSc Exploration Geophysics programme 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 am pleased that you found the programme to be in good shape overall, and I will be sure to pass on, and emphasise, your specific compliments to the relevant staff members, both teaching and administrative.

I would like to take this opportunity to respond to several points which you raised in your report.

“The Module Descriptions contain Module Objectives and Syllabus of varying quality such that it is difficult to form an opinion on the degree to which the Intended Learning Outcomes have been assessed to a fair and high standard. I would therefore recommend that the Programme Catalogue Module descriptions be reviewed and updated to include clear ILO’s.”

This issue has already been addressed for 2015-16 with a new syllabus ‘re-package’, and subjects being taught and examined within a new Module structure. I will re-emphasise the ILO issue with the programme delivery team preparing Semester 2 Handbooks, and for any more revisions planned for 2016-17.

“Students fed back that there were some inconsistencies in assessment, for example some short assignments carried equal weight to longer assignments. Students for whom English was not their first language felt disadvantaged in the near surface exam as the time was short for the exam and the question took them a longer time to read than a native speaker.”

We take on board your point about complexity and have already addressed the issue within the new Module structure. In regard to non-native-English speakers, there is an ongoing discussion regarding the raising of our minimum IELTS/TOEFL criteria, not least because poor comprehension has been identified as contributing to other problems such as plagiarism.

“Students fed-back that the course teaching was ‘first rate’ and this is backed up by the module feedback forms for most courses. However, students fed-back some concerns about the Seismic Reflection Interpretation and Sequence Stratigraphy module which is reflected in the lower module feedback summary scores.”

It is encouraging to hear that the students felt the teaching was of a high standard. The module you specifically refer to is the only module not re-structured for 2015-16, and I will ensure the issues raised in the student feedback are discussed within the teaching team.

“Exploration Geophysicists need to be able to deliver geophysical products to both numerical and geological standards. Math, Physics and Engineering students fed back that they struggled with geological terminology.”

I will make the suggestion of a Glossary of Terms to the relevant teaching staff. The fundamental geology teaching, including fieldwork, is now a full-class activity (not just for non-geologists), hence they will be more ‘immersed’ in it, and be able to draw on their geologist colleagues more.

“The subjects for dissertation were appropriate in most cases, with only two dissertation topics seeming to fall outside ‘Exploration Geophysics’ (if we take this to mean geophysics in petroleum exploration, development and production).”

The Leeds Exploration Geophysics programme has always offered a broad syllabus, and indeed until 2015-16 had a formal “Environmental & Engineering Geophysics” option package. Project choices are, to a large degree, student-driven: for this and future years, recognising the revival of employment opportunities in those sectors (and, in 2014-15, needing to find projects for 45 or more students) I imagine that we’ll continue to offer geophysical projects outside petroleum geophysics *sensu stricto*.

“Currently the summer project module manager is the same person as the programme manager which leads to a high workload as the summer projects finish and the new programme starts and represents a programme manager succession risk.”

The School has recently appointed a new applied geophysics staff member, _____, formerly _____, with the explicit intention that _____ becomes Programme Leader in due course. _____ is supportive of such a ‘distributed’ model of programme leadership, and _____ we will keep it in mind as _____ becomes more closely involved in programme management.

“Five of the summer projects undertaken in industry were covered by confidentiality agreements. As an industry external examiner I am not able to sign confidentiality agreements. I therefore did not take part in the oral exam or presentations for projects covered by confidentiality agreements, these were covered by the Academic External Examiner.”

This is a difficult issue for the School as providing high-quality projects on placements or even in Leeds (e.g. for overseas NOCs) often requires students to use current data. Organisations are, understandably, reluctant to work with the School without the signing of non-disclosure agreements. However, we will examine how we can work around this problem with your successor.

Once again, I would like to thank you for the time you have spent with our MSc students and staff this year and wish you every success in your new appointment.

Yours sincerely,

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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:	Earth & Environment
Subject(s):	
Programme(s) / Module(s):	Exploration Geophysics
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	MSc

Name and home Institution / affiliation of Examiner**Completed report**

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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?

Yes

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

NA

Standards

- 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 learning outcomes for the programme are highly suitable for an MSc in Exploration Geophysics.
- 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.*

There are no national benchmarks but these ILOs are similar to those for other MSc's, related to petroleum exploration & production, around the country. This includes the MSc by Distance Learning in Petroleum Geoscience which I direct at <> and our campus-based MSc in Petroleum Geoscience on which I have taught for nearly 30 years.

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.*

Assessment is by a combination of coursework (often related to industry standard software), examinations and a dissertation. These are the appropriate mechanisms for assessing the key ILOs and allowed appropriate recommendations for pass and merit. However, further thought may be needed to allow students to more frequently attain distinctions. For example, do the examination questions and project design allow the best students to really stand out?

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 on this course perform at a standard equivalent to that on other petroleum-related MScs around the country. I should emphasise that, as many of the cohort begin with very limited knowledge of geology, this is an exceptional outcome which the staff of EES can be proud of.

5. **For Examiners responsible for programmes that include clinical practice components, please comment on the learning and assessment of practice components of the curriculum**

NA

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.

NA

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.

Several of the projects produced results of publishable originality, quality and significance.

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

NA

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**

NA

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.

I received comprehensive information about the programme, the modules and my role. I was also given access to dissertations, exam papers, exam scripts, coursework, summaries of student performance, details of correspondence (e.g. where there were mark disagreements between examiners), summaries of survey results, the Leeds course catalogue and the Leeds VLE. This is an extensive list but I was still encouraged to ask for anything else I needed.

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.

I was sent these by email, given hard copies and given access to Leeds IT systems.

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 did not see the draft papers this year as I was appointed after these had been accepted.

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?

I saw all the exam scripts, half the dissertations and had access to most of the coursework. The Leeds form for "return of moderated mark" is a very effective way of showing the thoroughness (or otherwise) of marking and moderation. In most cases this was very satisfactory although there is scope for some staff to achieve the best-practice of other staff.

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

Project topics were very appropriate for Exploration Geophysics and covered a pleasingly wide range of topics. However, given that this programme is effectively a conversion course (to turn Physicists and Geologists into Geophysicists), I feel that all dissertations should be required to have a minimum level of both physics and geology. For example, I do not feel that simply using seismic data is sufficient to count as a "geophysics" project; students should also "add value" by, say, discussing the uncertainties and sensitivities of the well-ties. This was done by the vast majority, but not all, projects.

My reason for emphasising this point is that this programme needs to clearly distinguish itself from other petroleum-related programmes around the UK. In addition, employers expect that geophysicists have demonstrable competence across signal processing, mathematical inversion, sedimentology and structural geology (this is what makes them so highly employable). This wide range of topics is well covered by the taught programme but should also be an integral part of all dissertations. Physics (or geology) could be a very small part of a project but it should never be vanishingly small.

I am also a little concerned that a few projects did not clearly articulate aims and/or return to the aims in the conclusion. Aims should clearly relate to an identified problem to be solved and not simply be of the form "the aim is to do a seismic interpretation".

Finally, I strongly support the oral-examination system that is used as part of the project assessment. In addition to the valuable role of multi-faceted assessment in giving students the widest possible opportunity to demonstrate their achievements, oral examinations also provide external examiners with an unrivalled opportunity to assess and understand the programme.

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?

Administrative arrangements were exemplary and the department is to be congratulated on them.

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

I was not involved in the mitigating circumstances procedures.

Other comments

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

Programme staff should consider standardizing the form of all exams. Each exam was different and, in many cases, the rubric was overly complicated. There were also differences in the time allowed with one exam in particular being criticised by students as having too many questions in too little time. All of these factors confuse and stress students under exam conditions, especially those whose native language is not English. The complex nature of several exams also creates additional work for staff who, in some cases, need to produce unnecessarily large numbers of new questions every year whilst, in other cases, have complex marking schemes which produce extra work when calculating results (e.g. schemes which result in a mark out of 99). In my own MSc we have now standardized all exams to "Answer 4 questions out of 5" and this works well.

Another concern is with succession planning. The current programme director will inevitably be replaced at some point and this process will be easier if the tasks are more evenly spread across staff. In my experience at <>, succession (and sabbatical leave) is more easily handled if key tasks such as project organization and admissions are delegated.

I'd like to finish by commending the department on running such a valuable programme so effectively. Students clearly gain an enormous amount from their year with you as demonstrated by their academic achievements, by the continuing interest of industry in your graduates and by the highly supportive comments from the 2014-15 cohort during the VE's feedback session.



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03 January 2016

Dear

**RE: Response to External Examiner's Report, MSc Exploration Geophysics
2014/15**

I would like to express my sincere thanks to you for examining our MSc Exploration Geophysics programme 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 am pleased that you found the programme to be in good shape overall, and I will be sure to pass on, and emphasise, your specific compliments to the relevant staff members, both teaching and administrative.

I would like to take this opportunity to respond to several points which you raised in your report.

“Further thought may be needed to allow students to more frequently attain distinctions. For example, do the examination questions and project design allow the best students to really stand out?”

‘Can someone get a distinction in this?’ has always been a project-design criterion for the programme, and explicit (but necessarily generic) assessment criteria are given in the SOEE5110M Independent Geophysical Project module handbook. For the 2015-16 academic year, the School’s Examinations Officer has produced some further assessment marking criteria that are available to students, and this information will be re-emphasised to project supervisors as well as forming part of the Code of Practice on Assessment (which is available to Staff and Students).

“I feel that all dissertations should be required to have a minimum level of both physics and geology.”

The Programme Leader will make this point to all project supervisors, both for in-house and placement projects – the latter do still look to SEE staff for academic and ‘strategic’ guidance on the focus of projects.

“I am also a little concerned that a few projects did not clearly articulate aims and/or return to the aims in the conclusion.”

The need to do this has always been emphasised during the 4 “waypoint” formative assessments within the project, but perhaps more at the start of the project than the end. I will recommend that the supervisors emphasise it more, and will consider inclusion of a prescriptive contents list on the VLE for the project module.

“I strongly support the oral-examination system that is used as part of the project assessment.”

The Programme Leader and the teaching Team believe that the oral exam is an essential part of the assessment of the project module, and the ability to defend key principles orally is a key skill that the industry is looking for. We are confident that our long-standing procedures are in fact fully within University rules and guidelines.

“Programme staff should consider standardizing the form of all exams. Each exam was different and, in many cases, the rubric was overly complicated. There were also differences in the time allowed with one exam in particular being criticised by students as having too many questions in too little time. All of these factors confuse and stress students under exam conditions, especially those whose native language is not English.”

We take on board your point about complexity and have already addressed the issue within the new Module structure. In regard to non-native-English speakers, there is an ongoing discussion regarding the raising of our minimum IELTS/TOEFL criteria, not least because poor comprehension has been identified as contributing to other problems such as plagiarism.

“The complex nature of several exams also creates additional work for staff who, in some cases, need to produce unnecessarily large numbers of new questions every year whilst, in other cases, have complex marking schemes which produce extra work when calculating results”

The University has a policy of not allowing re-use of more than 20% of questions in papers, unless they are retained in the exam room. This means that staff do not have to generate questions every year, but this also means that students do not necessarily have access to ‘past papers’ for exam practice. We expect staff to produce ‘practice questions’. Your point about standardising the exam format is well-taken and the School’s Exams Officer has been considering guidelines to simplify marking structures.

“Another concern is with succession planning. The current Programme Leader will inevitably be replaced at some point and this process will be easier if the tasks are more evenly spread across staff.”

The School has recently appointed a new applied geophysics staff member, Dr Adam Booth, formerly of Imperial College, with the explicit intention that he becomes Programme Leader in due course. He is supportive of such a ‘distributed’ model of programme leadership, and he/we will keep it in mind as he becomes more closely involved in programme management.

Once again, I would like to thank you for the time you have spent with our MSc students and staff, we look forward to your continuing input to our programme in the New Year.

Yours sincerely,

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