

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):	Geography: Geographical Information Science
Programme(s) / Module(s):	MSc Geographical Information Systems (GIS) MSc GIS via Online Distance Learning
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	MSc/PgD/PgC

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?

Not applicable.

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

Not applicable.

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 aims and learning objectives for the programme and the breadth of material covered in the course related to the ILOs compares very favourably with other Masters schemes offered elsewhere in the UK.

The ILOs provide clear indications of what is needed to achieve a Masters in this area and coursework assessments are appropriate to the learning outcomes. The standards are appropriate for MSc level and provide suitable academic grounding for further PhD study or for a related professional career in the 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.*

I attended a special workshop organised by the RGS-IBG for External Examiners and I can attest that the Aims and ILOs of the Leeds MSc in GIS not only meet, but exceed the expectations of the national subject benchmarks for Geography.

This is one of best courses of its type in the UK in terms of the breadth and depth of material delivered. The colleagues delivering the courses have a strong reputation in the GISc community as innovative and cutting-edge researchers. The distance learning elements of the course are efficiently managed by responsive course leaders and the students on these courses are also benefiting by research-informed teaching of very high quality.

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.*

I am satisfied that all the material covered in the coursework assignments I reviewed reflects the ILOs and that the assessment methods used were entirely appropriate. All markers have provided students with excellent feedback and reasonable explanations on how the marks were derived alongside suggestions for improvement where applicable. I am content that the students have produced some excellent work, demonstrating detailed understanding of theoretical and methodological concepts, as well as advanced techniques commensurate with empirical research in GISc.

The design and structure of the types of assessment methods used are entirely appropriate and fully address the ILOs. There is an excellent balance of essay-style and project-style assessments, allowing the students to demonstrate their full range of skills across the board. I agree with the historic approach of no formal written examinations given the ILOs. Finally, the moderation procedures for all the modules are transparent, thorough and auditable. The students have commented that the quality of teaching is very high and that the balance of assessments is fair and match the learning outcomes. I reviewed a good range of assessed coursework for various modules, a range of material for the ODLC course, and also requested to see all the dissertations. I am fully satisfied with the quality of the students' work and the feedback.

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.*

Yes, this is reflected in the high quality work produced by students on both programmes in response to the assignments. Overall, there is a wide variety of assessment methods across the modules which permit a clear differentiation in marks based on student quality. Comprehensive and thorough criteria have been set for marking the assignments and the marking standards are consistently applied with a very transparent moderation processes in place. The level of written feedback provided to students is timely and to a very high standard, allowing them to improve in subsequent submissions. This is also evident in student progression between modules from the first to the second semester.

Three of the dissertations I read were of publishable quality and this was clearly reflected in the marks they were allocated. I suggested that these dissertations should be nominated for various prizes by the RGS-IBG Research Groups.

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

Not applicable.

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 second year as external examiner for the two MSc in GIS courses. The remodelling of the MSc programme from three years ago is now bearing fruit in the form of very high quality student work and very comprehensive feedback. I would like to reiterate here the examples of good practice I pointed out last year: (i) I am very impressed by the transparency of module moderation and thorough documentation; and (ii) the teaching team should be commented for the responsiveness in adapting the course material to an ever changing market, while retaining coherence throughout the courses. The organisation of the programme and the enthusiasm of the academic staff involved are highly commendable.

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 material provided to the students in terms of content and assignments, is cutting-edge of GIS/GISc practice and research in the UK and beyond. The curricula of both MSc courses clearly reflect the research interests of the academics teaching them. They are leaders in their research fields with long standing reputations within the academic and practice communities. I am particularly pleased to see that the TALISMAN node of the National Centre for Research Methods has informed teaching at the Masters level. Overall, there are strong links between the staff's research interests and their teaching and I have no doubt that the students of these courses benefit from the incorporation of research-informed material into the MSc curricula.

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

Although these Masters do not form part of an Integrated PhD, some MSc graduates have progressed to PhD studies with the School of Geography. Students awarded White Rose Doctoral Training Centre, quota/CASE or Advanced Quantitative Methods scholarship are expected to progress to a quantitative human geography PhD, therefore take the MSc GIS course as the first year of a 1+3 programme of PG studies. I cannot think of a better start for a postgraduate researcher.

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

Not applicable.

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 remain impressed by the organisation of the courses and professionalism of the course leaders. All the material was made available to me by the School through the VLE in advance of the meeting and it was sufficient to enable me to make the required judgements. Any requests for clarifications were acted upon swiftly by email or during my visit to the School before the Board. In addition, I had access to the dissertations requested, summary of dissertation marks, individual mark sheets/mark agreement forms and the module handbooks. Overall I am very pleased with the access arrangements, the information being provided, the examination procedures, feedback mechanisms and the prompt response to my queries.

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, I received all the appropriate documentation and the course leaders were responsive to my requests for clarifications. I received copies of the University's External Examiners Handbook and the Taught Students Handbooks, as well as the Module and Programme catalogue, which were all useful in understanding the module descriptions. I discussed in detail the overall programme structure and plans for subsequent years with the course team prior to the Board of Examiners. I was also granted access to the VLE in good time, where the available documentation, policies and procedures are coherent with regards to the expectations and role of the external examiner.

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?

Please note that the assessment drafts are not shared with the External Examiner. I support the previous external examiner's view for this arrangement to remain under the management of the course team to avoid overburdening. However, I have been kept informed throughout the year in relation to any major changes to assignments from previous years. There are no formal written examinations in these Masters and I am happy with the current arrangements.

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, all the assignments for all the modules were made available for me to look at, alongside the marking feedback, so that standards and practices could be evaluated. As explained above (see point 3), I looked in detail a number of modules and I am fully satisfied. The majority of the assessed work was very clearly annotated with appropriate feedback to the students showing very clearly how the marks were derived. This is particularly true, and important, for the work of ODL students. Any marking disagreements were fully documented on mark sheets alongside a justification for the final agreement reached. Overall, I am very happy with the levels of assessed work I have reviewed.

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

There is an excellent and varied choice of subjects for dissertations and the outcome is usually of very high quality. Having read all the dissertations and the feedback from all markers, I have great confidence in the dissertation marking process and the procedures in place to resolve potential marking disagreements between the markers. The standards of assessment are high, but fair, and the (blind) marking is remarkably close, while the agreed grades make good sense. The majority of dissertations reflect the research interests of staff, putting in good use methods taught during the course, but applied to original subject areas. I have been informed on dissertation marking throughout the year and provided feedback on marking and feedback practices, as necessary. This year I proposed that three very strong dissertations of publishable quality should be nominated for RGS-IBG dissertation prizes.

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 Board of Examiners in late October 2015 and was satisfied with the process and Board's recommendations. I am very happy with the arrangements and the recommendations of the Board were fair to all the candidates. I was also sent minutes of all relevant meetings during the course of the year and I am satisfied with the recommendations made and with the fact that my feedback has been treated seriously.

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

Yes, I am confident that all the necessary procedures are in place to try to support students in mitigating circumstances through their Masters studies.

Other comments

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

My second year as external examiner for the two Masters courses has been very enjoyable and rewarding. It is a great pleasure to work with the two course leaders, <> and <>, who have kept me informed throughout the year, without overburdening me. Their enthusiasm for the MSc courses and their engagement with the students are unparalleled and I look forward to continuing as external examiner with Leeds in 2015-16.

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Dear

I am pleased to be sending the MSc GIS team's response to your External Examiner's report, and I would also like to take this opportunity to thank you on behalf of the School of your very supportive work with the programme.

With best wishes

Head of School

Response to external examiner's report by

(MSc GIS)

We are grateful to [redacted] for [redacted] external examiner's report and for the time [redacted] has taken throughout the year to appraise the GIS Masters courses and give [redacted] advice on elements on which we have consulted.

It is reassuring to have confirmed that the Aims and Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) of the face to face (f2f) and online distance learning (ODL) Masters degrees in GIS are appropriate standards for persons who go on to research or professional careers. Moreover, to have the comparison of our Aims and ILOs assessed against national benchmarks for geography in the context of an RGS-IBG external examiners' meeting is really useful.

We have discussed with [redacted] the rationale for the various modes of assessment and are pleased to know that the mix of essays and empirical projects tests the students in appropriate ways and allows them to demonstrate the range of their abilities. We do believe that formal exams are not appropriate tests for the topics and skills which students need to have for their ongoing careers. On assessment timings, for f2f students a schedule of assignment deadlines is compiled at the start of each semester to help students to plan each assessment and to avoid hand-in log jams. For ODL students, the end of the module is when all coursework is formally due. (Advanced hand-in is offered on some modules so that students can manage their workloads and get early feedback on one assignment which can be used to help improve their approach and write-up of the second assignment.)

We have put effort into improving the level, style and timeliness of feedback to students and it is good that an external's appraisal of this and the student feedback confirms that improvements are evident. In terms of ensuring standards, we are pleased that the moderation process is both transparent and effective.

The students have produced some very good work for the assessments and for their dissertations. The external's observation of progression through the courses was useful and we are thinking of better ways to provide formative feedback and to help students with their time management (more for ODL than f2f in this respect). The graduating f2f and ODL students were both good cohorts and the standard of dissertations was high. It was useful to get suggestions from [redacted] on which research groups to submit which dissertations to for prizes and three have been forwarded to RGS-IBG research groups and another to the AGI.

In terms of research-led teaching, many examples used in lectures, for practical materials and for real world assignment scenarios are derived from convenor and tutor research and it is good to have this recognised by the external, as well as that colleagues delivering the courses have a strong reputation in the GISc community.

There has been a shift in the School during recent academic years to make all materials on the VLE (both teaching and assessments plus feedback), available to external examiners. This is now proving to be a useful vehicle through which externals can review materials. Indeed, having all dissertations available means that the full ability range is evident and has aided the breadth of dissertations being submitted to competitions. We are pleased that [redacted] finds our use of VLE to be good. As notes, this is of particular importance for the distance learning programme.

It good to know that the programme leaders and administrative support are seen by the external as supporting the students and programmes well and that the examination processes have gone well. We look forward to liaising with [redacted] during 2016 and will discuss some possible changes to the courses which may come into effect in 2017-18 following forthcoming discussions with colleagues.