

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 Languages, Cultures and Societies
Subject(s):	<i>Classical Civilisation, Classics</i>
Programme(s) / Module(s):	All Single and Joint Honours BA and MA programmes in Classical Studies
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	BA, MA

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

No

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

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.*

I am satisfied that the teaching aims and ILOs of the modules and the programmes I examined, as well as the structure and the content of the programmes in Classical Civilisation at the University of Leeds, are appropriate.

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, the degree programmes in Classical Civilisation at the University of Leeds compare highly favourably with similar programmes at other academic institutions in the UK, and square with the relevant national benchmarks and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications.

3. Please comment on the assessment methods and the appropriateness of these to the ILOs

- *The design and structure of the assessment methods, and the arrangements for the marking of modules and the classification of awards;*
- *The quality of teaching, learning and assessment methods that may be indicated by student performance.*

The assessment methods are entirely appropriate to the teaching objectives of the courses I examined. Internal marking is efficiently done and internal moderation is generally thorough. Scripts appropriately show a range of marks comparable to the rest of the sector. I just have a couple of comments:

1. There is some unevenness in the internal marking feedback and moderation. When done well,
(a) feedback (from first markers) provided the following: (i) a summary of points and overall judgement, checked against grade descriptors, to show why a script received the grades it received; (ii) specific comments on individual aspects; (iii) advice to students on how to improve their work (particularly those on lower borderlines); second markers' feedback was appropriate at half a page;
(b) moderation provided the following: (i) an introductory paragraph setting out the process, outlining the overall impression, and identifying any issues; (ii) a table of question titles and scores, so that at a glance one could see the spread of marks; and (iii) reasons provided for revising (or not revising) scores that directly checked against the grade descriptors (especially important when near a border).

I should make clear that *most* feedback and moderation was done extremely well. My concern rather is to encourage the sharing of good practice, so that all students benefit equally from the expertise of the staff.

2. There is some unevenness too in the grades being awarded. For example, one module gained only a couple of firsts, while another (comparable in terms of number and level of students) had ten firsts. This is not to say that the marking was itself uneven: grades were appropriately being awarded for the work submitted. Rather, it seems that the format of the two modules had an influence on the grades awarded, particularly with regard to: (i) the balance between assessed coursework and the exam (predictably, the modules which had a greater share of marks for assessed coursework scored higher grades); and (ii) the balance between gobbets and essays (the shorter the time a student had on a gobbet, the worse the grade). I would want to avoid the situation where all modules have exactly the same format. Still, perhaps some thought could be given to balancing out the tasks being assigned to students, which allows each the same opportunity to gain higher marks no matter what the particular subject. (I don't think it's the case that talented students are attracted by one module over another.)

One final point: some of the feedback was truly exceptional. I might single out here for special praise <>. Even when commenting on the weakest essays (one marked at 44, for e.g.), <> identifies positive elements: "And if you disagree, you need to explain why they are wrong: I was pleased to see that you do, in fact, do this at certain points in this essay. These examples of independent critical thinking provide an encouraging sign that you have the potential to write a better essay than this." Elsewhere <> notes where a student has got <> thinking about the subject differently. This kind of commentary is rare (I haven't seen it in many other contexts) and yet truly can have a transformative impact on all students, where the student is seen almost as a partner in research. I would be happy to see more feedback along these lines.

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 academic standards demonstrated by the students varied considerably, though in line with the sector as a whole. What was encouraging to see, however, was the opportunity for the best students to shine (one script, marked an 85, was one of the best I had read) and for all students to improve year on year (the marked difference in quality between the second and third years reflected their growing maturity as researchers and the high standard of teaching). Some students in the final-year cohort were exceptionally strong, comparing favourably with their counterparts in Oxford and Cambridge.

As last year, however, there still seems to be an issue over gobbet questions, which tended to produce work in exams considerably poorer than essays. Part of the problem might be time related, where students failed to engage in the detail of longer passages (particularly if there were several). It might also be due to poor preparation: students seem unsure whether to write "mini essays" or "commentaries", and few demonstrated a balance of the two strategies that was able to produce answers grounded in the text of the passages while engaged with the major themes of the broader work in question. A recommendation I made last year was that every effort should be made to standardise (as far as possible and reasonable) this type of question across the different modules, particularly with regard to how much time one has to spend on each passage. (Not surprisingly, the longer one has to do a gobbet, the better they tend to be: particular attention should be paid to the length of passages, which, after all, need to be read first before they can be commented on.) Gobbets remain an essential part of assessment, simply because they test the student's ability to "read" as a researcher. But more effort could be given to making sure that students are fully prepared for the kinds of questions that they are going to be asked on the exam.

As last year, again, I would also like to see clearer guidance regarding how much bibliography students are expected to work with (and a clearer difference between 2nd year and 3rd year work).

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 have already commented on good practice that could be shared in #4 above (with respect to providing feedback and moderation). I will also comment on aspects of the programme that are innovative and worthy of imitation under #7 below. Here I limit myself to commenting on the actual arrangements for external scrutiny.

In comparison to last year (2013/2014), the department was much better organised for the external examining meeting, due in part to its new-found security in the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies, and in part too to the better performing clerical staff. Still, there are a few issues that perhaps need addressing or careful consideration:

1. 1.5 days is a *very* tight turnaround. It can be done: but it does mean that staff need to be around and available.
2. This is especially important because the external examiner no longer has the ability to alter marks. Our role now is simply to draw the marking issue to the attention of the internal for them to address. Obviously this cannot work unless members of the department are available for consultation for the whole period.
3. We were perhaps a little alarmed that academics are tasked with individually entering marks, with no input from administrators. Having at least two sets of eyes on the input results might be better practice.
4. We noted that lowest grades had a discretionary removal: care needed to be taken to make sure that this process didn't include penalised marks.
5. Now that mitigating circumstances are no longer discussed at the final departmental exam board, we are keen to make sure that there is appropriate external oversight of their application.

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.

Evidence of the influence of research on teaching is evident throughout the curriculum. Modules are based on the department's world-leading research: Roger Brock's *Greeks and Barbarians* makes use of his expertise across a number of very different classical sources (from the comic playwright Aristophanes to the historian Herodotus); Malcolm Heath's *Greek Tragedy* uses his intimate knowledge of Aristotle as a way into thinking about the performance and meaning of the plays; Owen Hodgkinson's *Classics in 20th-21st Century Literature* draws on his work on the literary receptions of the classics in modern novels; Emma Stafford's *Greek Art and Society* comes out of her wide-ranging studies on Greek myth, religion, iconography and sexuality.

As last year, I particularly valued the involvement of the candidates at every step of the learning process. The course design and assessment of the different modules enable the students to grapple with questions that are at the cutting edge of research in Classical Studies. A good example of this was OH's *Classics in 20th-21st Century Literature* module, which by being assessed in the form of two long essays encourages students to conduct research for themselves. The high number of firsts on this module (a total of 10) is testimony to its success in engaging students in the research process. The feedback that candidates receive on their work also helps to make them feel as though they belong in and can contribute to the department's research culture. Here, as I mention above, MH's *Greek Tragedy* module is exemplary, in which strong scripts received feedback such as: "you've prompted me to think more carefully about...", while even those less strong were made to feel that they too contributed to a collaborative effort (with comments such as: "you're probably right to suggest that...").

At all levels students were asked to put into practice the theories and methodologies that they had learned; by doing so, they could feel part of a collective endeavour that help them to feel empowered and enthused to actively learn. What is crucial here is the commitment of the staff to "research led teaching", and, correspondingly, the amount of time and flexibility that members of staff have to conduct that research. Research led teaching is only possible if adequate time for research is put aside and the risk of doing cutting-edge work encouraged in the first place.

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 material needed for me to make the required academic judgements was always made fully available to me in writing. Many members of the academic staff who had acted as first or second markers of the examination scripts dropped in while I was moderating and commenting on the scripts, allowing me an opportunity to discuss issues with them.

- 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. The policies and procedures relating to my role as external examiner were coherent and consistent with the role I was asked to perform as External Examiner. In addition to the External Examiner Handbook, I was also given a copy of the Department of Classics Handbook 2014/2015, which contained information on grade descriptors, as well as further documents with information on the procedure for moderating assessed work, BA grade descriptors (again), MA grade descriptors, the marking process on the University's 20-90 module grade scale, and the criteria for discretion in degree classification. <> as Examinations Officer was most efficient in providing me with the necessary information, as and when required.

- 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.

- 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.

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

Yes.

- 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 was able to attend the Board of Examiners for the department and I was satisfied with its performance. The Head of Department chaired the session efficiently with the help of the Examinations Officer and a central administrator. Final awards are now determined at a School level, at which the department has one representative and an External Examiner sits, selected from any of the subject areas.

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

Mitigating circumstances are now considered at a School level.

Other comments

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

30th October 2015

Dear

Thank you for your 2015 External Examiner's report on Leeds Classics, which has been very helpful.

The integration of Classics into the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies is progressing very well. Shared administrative responsibilities across subjects has allowed to free colleagues' time and to pool expertise. Further integration is always possible, and we will continue to explore possibilities. One way in which we are embracing new opportunities is the expansion of the Joint Honours provision within the School. This year we started our first year of JH Ancient History programmes, which recruited numbers above expectations, and the School is exploring ways to expand our JH portfolio based on Classics recruitment processes.

We have now also transformed the former Fast Track Latin and Greek modules into long thin format modules (20 credits each), and they will run as Beginners and Intermediate Latin / Greek. This year saw the first recruitment onto the Beginners modules, and both Greek and Latin were oversubscribed. Retention is high, and it seems that the new format is more suitable to the student experience. At the moment we are drafting the module proposals for the Intermediate modules, and next year we hope to be able to assess how high retention rates are over a two year period. We are planning to teach students up to roughly GCSE standard in years 1 and 2, and allow them to explore the languages more freely in their third year. This should enable them to make the transition into postgraduate studies on both grounds of language competency and research ability.

We are delighted by your positive comments on the high quality of our students and the teaching they receive. Research-led teaching is an important element of the Leeds curriculum, and colleagues integrate research into teaching and the other way round, to the benefit of both aspects. Students are proud to be part of developing research, and this is often reflected in their enthusiasm for their subject in general and their connectedness to Classics at Leeds in particular. It is good to see, too, your favourable comparison of the best final-year performances with Oxbridge standards. As you know, we have discontinued our MA programme, but next year will see the first year of recruiting for our Master by Research, and we hope that the research-preparedness of our undergraduates will also show positively amongst those of our students who take the step from an Undergraduate to a Research degree.

As to your suggestion on exploring alternative assessment patterns to expand the students' skills base, we continue to explore ways to improve variations, also as part of our continued integration into the School. LCS is in the process of introducing a compulsory third year research module, and the input of Classics into the process has been requested based on our expertise and success with a module of this kind. We take note of your comments on the balance between gobbets and essays: this is a tricky subject. More conformity of exam practice would take away the flexibility of the learning experience both students and lecturers value, but we will explore possibilities to ensure that all students can achieve the best marks regardless of the assessment format as part of the same integrative process within LCS. This year, for example, we harmonised the amount of seminars, with now at least 5 seminars per 20 credit module, resulting, in most cases, in increased contact hours. One of the seminars is typically dedicated to exam practice in key modules, so the students will be able to receive better training in how to answer different types of exam questions, gobbets and essays, and develop and apply different skills in literary, historical or philosophical gobbets.

As last year, you asked for clearer differentiation between second-year and final-year work. Core modules in each year require different skills, with third year work offering more freedom of development and research than second year modules. In the optional 'special subject' modules we teach Level 2 and 3 students together. So far we have not attempted to make any formal distinction in assessment between the two levels. This is an area which we need to keep under review as we settle into our new School, where the norm is for separate Level 2 and Level 3 modules.

Thank you, too, for your positive remarks on the efficiency and thoroughness of internal marking. Your helpful suggestions on dissertation feedback in particular are noted, and we will continue to share good practice with regards to thorough and well-structured feedback. Colleagues in Classics take pride in giving the students effective feedback. We continue to consult the students on how they would like to receive feedback and what they are doing with it, in order to maximise the positive learning outcomes they should derive from feedback. Colleagues are encouraged to use the grade descriptors, and to include direct links on the module VLE pages to them, so that students can more easily assess how far they are from achieving higher marks.

Finally, thank you for your comments on the administrative side of the process, including your concerns that administrative help with inputting marks might reduce the opportunity to make clerical errors. The mitigating circumstances process is very robust in the new School, nevertheless we will explore how cooperation between administrative and academic staff can be improved to ensure fairness for all students.

Thank you once again for your assistance and helpful input over the 2014-15 session. We look forward to your visit for the 2016 Board.

All best wishes,

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