

The University of Leeds
EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT
ACADEMIC YEAR: 2013– 2014

Part A: General Information**Subject area and awards being examined**

Faculty / School of:	School of Modern Languages and Cultures
Subject(s):	Russian
Programme(s) / Module(s):	Modules with SLAV prefix, at levels 2 and 3 for Joint Honours Programmes
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	BA

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 Academic Quality and Standards**
Academic Quality and Standards Team
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

The format and structure of the SMLC Classification Board: *see Other Remarks at the end of this report*

The mentoring system: *see section 8 below*

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

My overall impression of the conduct of assessments in SLAV modules at Leeds is very favourable. Standards of performance remain high to very high (2015 was perhaps the best year of my four in this regard). This betokens great commitment and enthusiasm from staff members which is borne out by my encounters with them. They are a dedicated group of people who have always striven for the best for their students; they have also been unwaveringly helpful and supportive towards my input. They have also proved responsive, in that they have amended their practices in some regards when I have suggested that they should.

Certain concerns persist, however. In particular, I share their own concern that staff numbers are rather low, a point which is exacerbated from time to time by staff leave. Every year I have examined at Leeds there have been new, short-term temporary appointments. These have filled the gaps, but at the cost of stability and continuity. This is not to suggest any sort of crisis, but I **urge the university to consider the staffing levels within Russian with a view to increasing staffing levels, and as a matter of urgency.**

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 programme Aims and ILOs were fully commensurate with the level of the award.

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 have been external examiner at many UK (and Irish) HE institutions; on the basis of this extensive experience and my own experience within the subject I am confident that the programme is fully comparable with equivalent programmes at other institutions. This is now my fourth and final year at Leeds, and these standards continue to be conformed with.

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.*

In assessing work at Leeds, I again had the opportunity to consider a very wide range of assessment methods. These included oral presentations in Russian, translation from and into Russian, free composition in Russian, grammatical exercises; extended essays on a variety of topics, and lengthy dissertations. Clearly, considerable thought has gone into the design of the assessments (particularly within the language work): judging by this very extensive and varied evidence, I am confident that the design and structure of the assessment methods are fully appropriate.

Marking and classification are also exemplary. The standard of achievement by students is very good indeed, and in a variety of ways: some of the student work I have seen is amongst the best I have seen anywhere, and I would once more especially single out the final year dissertations, which allowed the students to display flair, individuality and originality. As I remarked during the examiners' meetings, this does not happen by chance, and I was impressed by the quality of the teaching that clearly underpins this level of performance. Here I would wish to single out for praise the quality and type of feedback provided to students. This is usually often very detailed and almost always typed, both of which attributes are to be commended. I have now externalised over 20 years in about 10 institutions in England, Scotland and Ireland, and, in terms of transferable skills, I would say that the Orals at Leeds are the best I have seen anywhere.

I should note, however, that not all feedback is typed. One examiner used almost exclusively written feedback, writing that I found almost illegible. **I strongly urge the university to prohibit the use of hand-written 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.*

See 3 above. In addition to my comments there, I would also note that the level of linguistic attainment by some students is outstanding, with the marks in some language modules being exceptionally high. As noted above, the performance of some students is the best I have seen anywhere. I did not detect any significant weaknesses. Stand-out achievements were in language work, especially the final-year oral, the dissertations and year-abroad projects. I would again emphasise that the *variety* of types of assessments allowed *all* students the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities and achievements.

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.

Some modules had been modified and updated and this 'refreshment' of the offering is to be welcomed. I also noted last year with satisfaction that some assessment practices have also been improved, such as the move to exclusively typed feedback. **There has been some back-tracking on this!**

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 influence of research was clearly manifest in a variety of modules, which produced some very interesting and unusual student work. Leeds has several research-active members of staff who are pre-eminent in their fields, and this is clearly manifest in the impacts on student learning. In reverse, however, I noted with regret and a little concern the relative dearth of 'mainstream' nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian literature and history. I am aware that student and staff numbers constrain the viability of wider offerings, but I would again suggest that creative ways might be investigated to diversify provision in non-language areas.

For Examiners involved in mentoring arrangements

8. If you have acted as a mentor to a new External Examiner or have received mentor support please comment here on the arrangements

I was appointed as mentor to the new examiner for German, as both the German externals were new this year. The arrangements for mentoring were, in effect, non-existent. Other than being invited to act in this capacity I received no guidance or framework from the university.

The Examination/Assessment Process

9. 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 sufficient guidance to perform my role effectively.

10. 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 received module handbooks, marking criteria and so on for all the modules that I would be moderating, so I can say that I did indeed receive appropriate documentation relating to the programme for which I had responsibility.

11. 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 received draft assessments, and was able to comment on them as relevant. The questions and assignments were appropriate, and changes were made when I suggested them.

12. 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 had made available to me, I think, ALL assessed material for levels 2 and 3. In sampling these materials I would say that the scripts were clearly marked, and, as noted above, the system of feedback is excellent. I would say that I have confidence in my evaluation of the standard of student work.

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

This area was one of the outstanding aspects of student work. Dissertations were written, many to a very high standard, on a very wide range of topics, including Lebedev, Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*; Education; and Wine. The opportunity for students to choose their own very individual topic is an excellent feature, and facilitates real excellence; the method and standard of assessment were entirely appropriate.

14. 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?

The administrative arrangements were completely satisfactory for the whole process as regards the SLAV modules. The operation of this Board of Examiners was exemplary; I was able to attend the meeting, and I was satisfied with its recommendations. **However, I formed a very different view of the operations for the SMLC Degree Classifications Board: see Other Remarks.**

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

At the Board of Examiners there were references to various cases of mitigating circumstances, and these were properly discussed. I was also informed of the way that the mitigating circumstances and medical evidence systems operate at Leeds. Procedures in these areas seem entirely satisfactory. Again, this applies at the SLAV level, but not to the same extent at the SMLC Board.

Other comments

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

In my report in the previous year I raised a number of issues and I am pleased to report that the most serious of these, the use of the so-called 'base-room' has been modified. I am very pleased that Leeds staff have been responsive in this matter, and I feel that I was able to execute my role much more efficiently and effectively again this year.

In addition to the comments above I would like to add the following by way of summary of the overwhelmingly positive experience of examining at Leeds, as well as to mention again some ongoing concerns. These comments will summarise and develop what I have already said. I will also raise my very serious concerns about the SMLC Board.

A. General remarks

As in my first three years I have been very positively impressed by almost all aspects of my work for and at Leeds University.

I have received all appropriate materials and information in good time so that I have been able to conduct my work as external examiner for Russian in an appropriate manner.

I have found all staff at Leeds, administrative and academic alike, to be very welcoming, responsive and highly professional. I perceive relationships between staff and students to be excellent as is evidenced by the overall standard of work that I have seen and, especially, by the conduct of the Orals: as noted elsewhere, these are a paragon of the format! (I watched them this year on-line).

In my first year I commented on the fact that I had found the 'base room' system unsatisfactory for a variety of reasons. Leeds responded to this and so, at my request, I have again been sent materials on a number of occasions. This has greatly improved the conditions in which I have been able to work, and has moved Leeds closer in line with national practices.

I have been sent a great variety of materials, essays, examinations, presentations materials and some other materials. In all cases, I have been impressed by both the standard of student performance and by the level of professionalism of the marking. This last comment is the case in several respects: standards of marking are consistent, both internally and across modules, and as against national criteria and benchmarks. The quality and helpfulness of feedback is very good. I noted in 2014 that 'it is good to see that all of it is now typed.' I regret that this is no longer the case and urge that this become the universal standard.

Student attainment is high with a significant proportion of students achieving first class marks, and very few marks at the lower end of the scale, with even fewer fail marks, except for technical reasons (for example, late submission). This level of attainment betokens both a high level of ability amongst students, but also high quality teaching and guidance.

While all the work has been of a high quality, I would especially like to comment on the Orals and dissertations, as noted earlier. More broadly, I have noted that it is especially where students are given (virtually) free choice in what they write / talk about that they do best.

Although, as noted, I was not able to attend the Orals this year, more broadly, I would say that the highlight of my involvement with Leeds has been my attendance at the Orals. I would like to propose that it be an expectation that a ML examiner attend the orals in their language at least once. **I made this proposal last year as well, and have received no response to it; I also believe that this proposal has not been implemented – and perhaps not even discussed.**

More broadly, and checking both email and paper records I do not believe that I have ever received an official response to any of my examiner's reports.

Dissertations

As with the Orals there was again a very impressive range of topics: it is great to see such diversity! There is very ample and helpful feedback for all the work I've looked at. The students' work itself also displays very high levels of expertise, reflecting once more the high level of input from supervisors.

B. Individual Comments, Suggestions / Recommendations

1. As I also commented in both the previous years, I gather that almost all Russian modules are only completed in the course of the year, that is they are, to use the parlance, 'long-thin' modules. I suppose one of the implications of universities moving to semesters and modules was to create distinct units of learning that students would complete and then move on at the end of the semester. The situation at Leeds seems to be at variance with those principles.

2. I understand that it is because of the numbers problem, but there are not very many modules available to Russian students beyond language. If the university could think of creative ways to diversify the offering of Russian modules beyond language, I am sure everyone would find that helpful.

3. Over the three years I have examined at Leeds I have become used to the 20-90 system of marking within GRASS. However, as noted before, it is manifestly, by Leeds' own admission, far from satisfactory, and clearly different from the simpler percentage system used more or less throughout the British education system. I therefore urge you to consider moving to that system.

C. The SMLC Board

I attended this this year for the first time and found that there are several matters of concern arising from it.

1. When I was told that the meeting would last for two full days, I queried why this would be the case and was told that this was because that there would be c. 700 graduands, and that each would be discussed individually, however uncontentious they were. Nearer the time, and then again at the beginning of the meeting I queried this. It was established during this discussion that, as is common practice these days, all degrees are determined by algorithm, and are computer-generated; moreover, they

are checked by exam officers prior to the meeting.

2. As a result of these methods of producing these marks and the prior checks, it is quite unnecessary to then scrutinise each case. I pointed this out at the beginning of the meeting; however, the meeting proceeded as planned. In the course of the first morning we considered about 175 students, of whom 10 were discussed in some detail, of which only 4 were genuinely problematic.

3. At this point I informed the Chair of the meeting that I was not prepared to participate in what was proving to be a colossal waste of people's time, and of public money, and left the meeting. I assume, though, that this continued for another day and a half. Throughout the time I was present there were 6 Leeds staff in place throughout, with up to about a dozen people in the room at any given time. As I pointed out on several occasions and do so again now, in the present way of determining degree results there is no need whatsoever to discuss cases that are in no way problematic, and have already been checked by exam officers! The 700 students could have been covered in a single morning, probably less.

4. As I say, this is a shocking waste of public resources, and I call upon Leeds to discontinue this practice forthwith.

5. However, there were other aspects of the meeting that also raised concern. Academic staff only attended the meeting where their subject areas were being discussed. For a properly constituted Board of Examiners, though, *all* examiners should be present throughout. As a result, whenever the few students who really needed to be scrutinised were being discussed, and their classification potentially to be voted on, the discussion was conducted only by those *who happened to be in the room at the time*. This is also very far from good practice.

6. Some of the printed Guidance Notes also were unsatisfactory. In particular, under the heading **School criteria for academic discretion**, paragraph (c) reads: 'Single weak modules: if one module is clearly out of step with the candidate's profile, then the reasons for this should be considered. Specifically, this applies to a single module that is one or more classes below the student's average.' There was some confusion in the room as to what this actually means. For example, if the student's average is 60, is a mark of 59 for an individual module a case in point, or does it have to be at least a whole class lower (in this instance 50)?

7. In view of all these points, I urge Leeds as a matter of urgency to review the conduct of this Board.

School of Languages, Cultures and Societies

FACULTY OF ARTS



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

25 April 2016

Dear

External Examiner Report (2014/2015)

Many thanks for your External Examiner report and your comprehensive and helpful comments on our programme, modules and methods of assessment. We are very pleased to hear that once again you were impressed by the achievements of our students and that the standard of our students' work has been consistently high during your role as External Examiner for Russian at Leeds. Your comments about our final-year dissertations and oral exams were particularly encouraging. We are also pleased to hear that things have run smoothly this year from an administrative perspective. As you know, several members of staff have needed to take leave for personal reasons and on some occasions we have not been able to meet deadlines for setting assignments; therefore, I would like to thank you once again for being so understanding this year.

I am also glad that you were happy with the arrangement for sending you students' work for moderation at various points in the academic year. I will pass on your reservations about the base-room system as well as your recommendation that external examiners attend the final-year oral exams at least once during their appointment to the School Exams and Assessment Officer. There has been some informal discussion within GRASS about external examiners' attendance at final-year oral exams following your suggestion at the 2013/2014 Module Marks Meeting. For Russian all students are examined by the same members of staff and the external examiner can attend all exams. There are issues, however, in subject areas with larger cohorts of students (e.g. French, German, Spanish) which have multiple teams of examiners and in which several oral exams may run at the same time. The external examiner(s) could attend only some of the exams and students whose oral exam the external examiner attends might see this as a disadvantage. Nevertheless, this is something that can be discussed further at School level.

Thank you also for raising your concerns with our programme and highlighting ways in which we can improve student feedback. Following your advice from the first GRASS Module Marks Meeting that you attended, we have tried to provide more typed feedback to students, but, as you commented this year, we can do more in this respect. "Macro-level" issues, as in previous years, are (1) module structure ("short-fat" vs. "long-thin" modules), (2) our range of non-language modules and (3) the staffing situation in Russian at Leeds. The points that you make in this year's report, as well as those in previous reports, are very valid, and we have taken steps to vary both the structure and range of our modules in the last two academic years.

As we noted in last year's response to your External Examiner report, we have introduced several "short-fat" modules at Level 3 and we are considering the introduction of a number of new Level 1 single-semester modules. Some modules, however, are best delivered over the course of an academic year and we believe that a mixed model is most appropriate for our Russian programmes. Our Level 2 modules, for instance, must be delivered as "long-thin" modules because of our unique 15- and 20-credit merged module format.

We agree that a wider range of non-language modules would benefit our students; however, we are restricted in the number of content modules that we can run in an academic year owing to both staff and student numbers. We do believe that our selection of academic content modules is comparable to that of other similar-sized departments of Russian at UK HEIs, and our students have the opportunity to develop their interests in the areas of Russian literature, culture and visual culture for which we run modules at all levels. In addition, the School has introduced several "cornerstone" modules at Level 1, most of which have a focus on Russia, and students have access to modules relating to Russia offered elsewhere in the University (though, as we have discussed, enrolment on these modules is not always straightforward for our students). This year we sought students' direct input into the programme, asking student reps at all levels to let us know what kind of optional modules students would like to be introduced. Thanks to this initiative we have introduced a beginners' Czech

module, available to students at all levels, and a Level 3 modern history module that focuses on Russia from perestroika to the annexation of Crimea.

With regard to the staffing situation in Russian at Leeds, I note your concerns that (1) staff numbers are low and (2) temporary short-term appointments are not a “long-term” solution, and I will draw them to the attention of colleagues at School/Faculty level.

The LCS Classification Board and the 20-90 scale are also issues that need addressing at the School/Faculty and University levels; therefore, I will forward your comments to the relevant individuals.

On behalf of all colleagues in Russian and GRASS, I would like to thank you for your hard work this year and throughout your post as External Examiner for Russian at Leeds. Your helpful comments and suggestions have not only allowed us to make improvements to individual assessments but they have given us a valuable insight into our programme. I have been GRASS Exam Tutor for most of your time at Leeds and it has been a pleasure working with you. I wish you all the best in the future.

Best wishes,

Director of Russian
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Email