

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:	Faculty of Arts/School of Modern Languages and Cultures
Subject(s):	<i>Linguistics and phonetics</i>
Programme(s) / Module(s):	BA in Linguistics and Phonetics (and combined 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

Just the changes to marking standards outlined in more detail 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?

NA

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.*

The intended learning outcomes are entirely appropriate for both the single and combined honours programmes.

The standards are generally appropriate, if arguably a little on the stringent side. Although confirmed classifications were not yet available, from putting together the individual module marks, it seems that only one student from the whole cohort will receive a first class honours degree (i.e., around 5%). Overall, around 20% of UK graduates receive a first class honours degree (<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/content/view/3484/#qua>, and I find it difficult to believe that students who study linguistics (a relatively difficult course) at Leeds (a relatively high ranking University) are – as a group - below the level of the average UK student. My conclusion is therefore that you are marking more harshly than comparable institutions. This certainly seemed to be the case when I was inspecting individual pieces of coursework. For example, in several modules, exam answers that were largely accurate and detailed – though unoriginal and derivative of the lecture notes - received marks in the 40s or (low) 50s as opposed to, what I would expect, the high 50s, or even low 60s.

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.*

Both the single and joint honours degree programmes meet national benchmarks, and are extremely similar to those of equivalent degrees at other institutions.

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.*

Each module (except the dissertation) includes one piece of exam and one or more pieces of coursework (typically counting for around 20%). The range of tasks in the assignment was excellent (discourse analysis, phonology workbook, essay, group project, oral/aural components) and I appreciated the flexibility module co-ordinators have in matching the task to the intended learning outcomes of the module. The exams also followed a wide range of different formats (MCQs, short answers, essays) which were generally well matched to the different topics. Although I can see the advantages of this flexibility, there is also something to be said for the opposite approach (followed in my own department) where – with a handful of exceptions for modules with particular learning outcomes – exams largely follow a standardized format (e.g., all MCQs in Yr1, all short-notes answers in Yr2, all 2/6 exam essays in Yr 3). I wouldn't suggest going this far, but it may be worth thinking about whether students would prefer to have a more standardized format wherever this would be possible, while still achieving the learning outcomes.

The marking and moderation systems seem to be very robust. In particular, I was pleased to see that marks were sometimes moved up or down in response to suggestions from the moderator, which does not seem to happen often at other institutions. However, this did seem to be done on a rather ad-hoc basis (i.e., the moderator simply felt that marks were rather high or low overall), rather than with any systematicity. An alternative might be to try to ensure comparable means across modules (or, at least, across modules sat by the same groups of students), or to raise/lower marks to be more commensurate with national standards (see above). In some cases, however, the moderation paper-trail was incomplete (e.g., a moderator had suggested marks be moved up or down, but it was not clear whether or not this had actually been done). Both moderators and module coordinators should be reminded of the importance of completing all of the module moderation paperwork before the external examiners' meeting. The level of feedback was excellent for all modules. The projects are all double-marked, which is important given the double-weighting of the module.

I echo, from last year, my surprise at the continued use of a fully-continuous – as opposed to categorical - marking scheme. I do not believe that markers can really distinguish work that is deserving of 64 vs 65 vs 66, but I know that your hands are tied here by University-wide procedures. However, I do think it is worth reiterating to the powers that be that you are out of line here with all the other departments in which I have worked or studied (Liverpool, Manchester, Nottingham, Sheffield)

The standard of work produced was very high overall, and I was particularly impressed by performance in the syntax modules and the dissertation.

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.*

As noted above, the wide range of assessments offers students ample opportunity to show their strengths and weaknesses. However, as also noted above, the marks are almost certainly somewhat lower than for students at comparable institutions, which I think is more likely a result of stricter marking standards, rather than lower student ability.

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.

A new lecturer has been brought in to teach the phonology component, which seems to be working well (though these modules were assessed by a second external examiner, also new this year). However, since this lecturer replaced an outgoing lecturer, these changes have not addressed another issue I raised last time around: Staff are rather over-stretched, with a standard teaching load of 4 UG modules (plus PG teaching). In comparable institutions, 2 modules per staff member would be more usual.

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.

Most modules are taught by a member of staff who has published important research in the relevant area. Students achieving the highest marks in the project often conduct research that is close to publishable standard.

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

NA

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.*

Yes, the documentation was sufficient (though see my comments above about the importance of a complete paper trail), and I was easily able to request additional information where required.

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.*

Yes. But one plea: While some staff gave very detailed marking schemes and model answers, which were extremely helpful, some gave almost no information of this kind. It makes our job as externals MUCH easier if we are provided with this information.

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?

Yes, I provided feedback on the draft exams, and was very satisfied with the response from staff.

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?

Yes.

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

Yes, this was a real strength. The standard of marking was entirely appropriate, and there were no cases of unresolved discrepancies between markers.

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?

Yes to all of the above! I was particularly pleased that you followed my recommendation and brought in a second external examiner. This allowed for both better coverage in terms of our expertise, and for us to dedicate sufficient time to each module.

15. 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

The only further comment is one that I also made last year. With regard to the dissertation, there is something of a discrepancy over whether or not students are required to conduct statistical analyses of their data (I saw some excellent analyses, but also some important mistakes, and some dissertations that could – perhaps even should – have used statistical analyses, but did not). I appreciate that the ideal solution – the introduction of a research methods and statistics module – is not feasible due to staffing constraints, but I would encourage you to think seriously about alternatives. There are some excellent online courses available. Other departments at Leeds will run such modules that your students could possibly join (Psychology, Medicine). Or you could have a once-a-year training day, given by an external expert.

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26 August 2014

Dear

Many thanks for your External Examiner's Report for the 2014-2015 UG programmes in Linguistics & Phonetics. Like last year, we appreciate your positive comments on the range of tasks used in our assessments; we are pleased to see the quality of our students' work commended; and we note with gratitude your assessment of staff expertise.

I would like to assure you that we are taking your observations on our marking practices very seriously. At our Away Day in July, we reviewed our module marks distributions of the past 5 years, and arrived at the conclusion that our marking is indeed 'on the stringent side'. We agreed to pay closer attention to marks distributions in first marking and moderation, and to ensure that our average module pass marks are in the 62-64 range unless there is a clear justification for awarding lower marks. In the past 5 years, average passes have frequently been at or below 60, and we accept that this does not accurately reflect the standards our students achieve. We also agreed to make fuller use of the top end of the marking scale. We are working on new moderation and feedback pro-forma which should support the implementation of these agreed changes in practice across modules. The new moderation procedure will highlight the importance of keeping clear records; we regret that some paper trails were left incomplete this year. It will also remind the first marker to produce an explicit marking guide for the benefit of the moderator and External Examiner.

Over the past few years we have made progress in diversifying our assessment methods and in introducing methods that keep preparation and marking loads manageable in the longer term, such as MCQ papers. We have not yet explored whether increased standardisation of assessment formats may be beneficial. This is something we will do over the coming years. In response to your other suggestions, you are right that our hands are tied with respect to the use of a continuous marking scale. You are also right that we face comparatively high teaching loads, at least in terms of numbers of modules per staff member. Discussions are ongoing as to how best to address this. Finally, we will continue to embed more research methods, including quantitative analysis methods, into our programme, and offer our students more self-study materials and links to external resources. Up to now our assessment has been that we do not offer students enough relevant guidance to make the use of appropriate quantitative methods in dissertation projects a requirement. We would like to move to a situation in which we can require at least an attempt at applying relevant quantitative methods; however, it may take several years still before we are there.

Yours sincerely,

Director of Linguistics & Phonetics